

## Right-Side Up: Til the Landslide Brought Me Down by midas\_touch\_of\_angst

**Series:** Right-Side Up AU [Stranger Things (2016)] [2]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Character Swap, Alternate Universe - Power Swap, Alternate Universe - Reverse, Alternate Universe - Role Reversal, Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, Angst, Demonic Possession, F/M, Found Family, Gen, Possession, Sequel, reverse au, so much angst you guys

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Dustin Henderson & Eleven, Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven & Nancy Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Jonathan Byers & Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Kali Prasad & Mike Wheeler, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington & Jonathan Byers, Steve Harrington & Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven, Will Byers & Kali Prasad, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-12-17

**Updated:** 2018-01-30

**Packaged:** 2022-04-20 16:34:21

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 44

**Words:** 69,386

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Reverse!AU: It's been a year since Max came back from the Upside-Down, but part of it still lingers in her, threatening to reveal itself. El is too focused on the loss of the Boys to notice until it's too late, and by then something has happened. The Other Side of Hawkins has a new threat, one much bigger than the Demogorgon, and unless they can find a way to stop it, the world as they know it will turn Upside-Down.

Rated Teen and Up for Swearing and the occasional Violence.

Season One: [http://archiveofourown.org/works/12652938?](http://archiveofourown.org/works/12652938?view_full_work=true)  
view\_full\_work = true

# 1. The Rainbow Room

## Notes for the Chapter:

yeah so I was gonna post this tomorrow and give you guys a breather day inbetween Seasons but... meh, this is more fun.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Rainbow Room*

*They were in the Rainbow Room.*

*They were playing with the blocks, and she let him knock down their tower whenever it got too big. After several minutes, they heard a bit of noise outside, which wasn't uncommon. But this noise was louder, much louder. There were shouts- angry shouts. The boy started to shake, no longer paying attention to the game. He didn't like shouting; it was always when he did something bad, when he was about to get punished, when he was about to get hurt.*

*She grabbed his arm, then, a small support in the storm of terror he was feeling. Their eyes were fixed on the door; his were scared and teary, while hers were narrowed and angry. He wondered what she was planning on doing, what she would do if someone came in. They never talked about themselves, they mostly just played in silence, so he didn't know if she hated the shouting as much as he did.*

*The shouting stopped after a while, but they still stared at the door.*

*It opened after a few more minutes, and the boy didn't even look at who entered before he ducked behind her arm. He didn't know much about her, but he trusted her. She was the first person he'd met who'd never shouted at him.*

*A man entered, someone they didn't recognize. He used words the boy didn't know, but he knew enough- he was saying "leave", "go away", "problem", "new place." The boy didn't like that. He didn't like problems,*

*and he didn't like new places.*

*The man came further into the room and grabbed the boy, tugging on his arm. He wanted him to move. The boy didn't want to do that. He shook his head. That was a mistake; the man started to shout, and the boy shook, and the man tugged on his arm until he ripped him away from the girl. The boy turned, to see the girl starting to shout, too. Shouting that she wanted him to stay with her.*

*The man said more words, and the ones the boy knew just made him start to cry. He knew that he said that he wasn't going to stay, and she was going to a different Lab. Different Rainbow Room. The boy started screaming, then, screaming and crying and trying to get away, trying to get to the girl. He didn't want her to go to a different place. He wanted her to stay with him.*

*"No!" the girl shouted, as another man entered, grabbing her own arm and starting to drag her away. "No! No! NO!"*

*Suddenly, a fire burst in the middle of the room. The boy screamed and jumped back, terrified and confused. The men screamed, too, but the girl did not. The girl's eyes widened in surprise, sure, but she didn't look scared. She seemed eerily calm about it, and simply stared at the man, holding out her hand for the boy.*

*The fire suddenly disappeared, and then flickered back to life. The boy suddenly realized that it wasn't warm, and there wasn't smoke, and the fire seemed to be the wrong shade of orange. The men realized this, too, and one walked forwards, stomping onto the flames. The fire vanished, as if it had never been there. It might not have been.*

*The men were shouting again, but not at the boy this time. They shouted at the girl, with negative words, saying that she could not use those on them, and she shouldn't have grown attached. She started screaming, too, repeating that she wanted the boy to stay. She wanted to stay together.*

*In another flash, the man holding the girl slapped her, and she fell to the ground. The boy started to cry again, reaching out to grab her, reaching out to help her. He couldn't get to her; they wouldn't let him. The man started to drag him away, and he started screaming for her. He only knew one thing to call her- her number- but he knew she had a name. She had a*

*name but he couldn't remember it. She wasn't supposed to say it.*

*"I'll find you!" she yelled, struggling to her feet, tears in her eyes, as the man who'd hurt her now held her back, holding her away from him. "I'll find you! I'll find you!"*

*The boy was dragged away, and into a car, and into another Lab. For more tests, more yelling, and more crying. But no more girl.*

*She never found him.*

Will sat up with a start, breathing heavily, with tears in his eyes.

It took him a second to figure out where he was, panicking when he realized the walls were brown, and not white or gray, and there were more things in the room than a simple table and paper stuck to the wall. There was a chalkboard, and drawers, and a carpet on the ground, and his bed was soft and there were crickets outside.

He reached up to wipe his tears; his stomach was still in knots, and he was still shaking. He quietly raised his voice, calling, "Mom! Mom!"

Being able to call for her was something he cherished. She could hear him very easily from her room, which was just next to him, and she would be there. In less than a minute, she ran in, and he reached out and hugged her, and they were together, and she was telling him that it was alright, that she was *here*.

"What happened?" she asked. "What happened, baby?"

"Bad dream." he said quietly.

"About... about the other place?"

She didn't need to say its name; they both knew what his nightmares were always about. He nodded, and she held him tighter. She told him once that she had nightmares about that Place too- the place that had done bad things to her, and had taken him away. They took him away and they had to fight to get back together.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

Normally, he didn’t, and she would accept that, and they’d just hug until he fell asleep again, or until Jonathan woke up and they would just silently go and make breakfast. But when he closed his eyes, he saw her face again.

“It was about Eight.” he said.

His Mother looked down at him, a little confused. “Eight?”

She knew about his friends- their numbers, and the names they’d chosen for themselves. She hadn’t met them, but he’d drawn them for her so she knew what they looked like. And she knew that none of them were numbered 008.

“A girl.” he said. “Nice girl.”

“What happened to her?”

Will shook his head. “Gone.”

“Gone?”

He took a deep breath. “We were in the Rainbow Room together. Before I started seeing Auras. Something happened... we got sent to different places. One day, I asked what happened to her, and they just said she was gone.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry.” his Mom said, and they hugged more.

After a second, Will asked, “Can you sing again?”

“Honey, I can’t sing very well.”

Will blinked up at her. “You sing beautiful.”

He never knew any music in the Bad Place. But Jonathan loved music, and his Mother loved music, and now *he* loved music. She smiled at him, and hugged him again, and sung for him.

*“Took my love, and took it down...”*

As she sung, he felt his eyes drift to her drawers. There were secret files in there, about the Bad Place, ones she'd used to try and find him. He never looked at them, he never wanted to think about what had happened to him.

*"I climbed a mountain and I turned around..."*

But he wondered. He wondered if there was something about Eight in there. If... if there was something about the Others.

*"And I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills..."*

But he wouldn't look now. He shut his eyes and hugged his Mother tighter.

*"Til the Landslide brought me down..."*

Far away, a man was kicked to the floor.

He looked up, seeing only the group in masks. After a moment, two ran off, saying something about looking for money. Another turned towards the door, saying something like, "We can't take too long, the other two are still in the car." And then the final intruder reached up, pulling her mask off, staring him in the eyes. As she did, his eyes drifted to her wrist, and he paled.

He saw her numbers. Tattooed on her wrist, the numbers he thought he'd never see again.

008.

"Remember me?" she said, as she pointed a gun to his head, and pulled the trigger.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

K, so let's get some things straight:

1) Like Season One, if a chapter would basically be the same as canon but with different names, I won't

write the whole thing- maybe reference it happening, or write a bit of it, but it will mostly be new stuff. Some exceptions apply- aka basically whenever Max gets possessed.

2) If you're just starting this fic and you have no idea what's going on, there's a link to Season One in the Fic Description, as well as links to the Series/Collection.

3) Update times will be the same as Season One- around 2:30-3:00EST for most days, and 12:30-1:00EST for Saturdays. If I can't post on a certain day, I'll let you know.

4) This IS Forty-Four chapters, so it will be long. After this is over, I'll probably do a fic of One-Shots relating to this AU until Season Three drops and I can plan for that.

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoy it!



## 2. Something is Coming

### CHAPTER TWO

#### *Something is Coming*

Max's last year had been a little wild, to say the least.

When she'd returned to school, and all the kids gave her side-eyes or fearful looks or the occasional sympathetic glance, everyone acted like she was either an infant or a ghost. The first time someone asked what had happened to her was right after Christmas Break, when a kid in her Science Lab wanted to know if she'd been to the afterlife. "Yeah, I went to Hell," she said simply. "But, more importantly, I finally beat *Dragon's Lair*."

Now, she knew it wasn't actually Hell- at least, she *thought* so. Technically, they didn't *really* know shitty people just went to the Upside-Down when they died, but since she didn't see any tortured souls running around, she could reasonably assume it was just a messed-up alternate dimension.

Still, if she went to Hell when she died, she couldn't think of anything worse than what she'd lived through.

She sometimes saw it. Not just in her nightmares- though those were definitely there. At first it was super rare- maybe once a month, when she was doing something and a flare of panic would light in her chest, and suddenly the world was dark and cold and wet and she could do nothing but try to keep breathing until the world came back.

She'd told Hopper once they started getting more frequent. She was sitting on the couch one day, and it was the second time in two weeks that the world vanished around her, and Hopper saw her freak out and wanted to know what happened. She told him, and then he asked if she wanted to go to the Lab to have them figure out what was going on. He wouldn't go if she said No, but she said Yes, and

now every time the world turned upside-down, she had to have wires strapped to her head and Doctors acting like she was a baby and recount what she'd seen, which was basically the same shit every time.

But, hey, her year wasn't that bad. She hadn't seen her parents in months, so that was a bonus. Her Mom talked to her over the phone sometimes, and her teachers let her be a little more lax on her homework. She hadn't received a skateboarding injury since Valentine's Day (long story) and she managed to keep the top score on Dig-Dug for all this time. And, well, she got to be El's sister.

There were lots of spare rooms, but Max just dragged a cot into El's room and found herself a place in the corner. Every now and again, Max would find a way to wake her up, with a cup of water poured over her face or a loud horn blow near her ear. The two of them could spend even more time together than they already had, and, well, it was a lot easier to talk about things when El was only a few feet away at all times.

"Hey, Max!" El said, elbowing her sort-of sister as they walked out of the theater. "What'd you think?"

"I think I kinda wanna be the Terminator." Max said, letting out a laugh.

"He's the *villain*, Max!"

"Yeah, but he's so *cool*!"

El rolled her eyes, leaning against the theater wall, scanning the street. "Dad should be here soon."

"Cool." Max said, standing next to her and playing with a strand of hair.

"Hey," El added cautiously, "Don't mention that we saw a Rated R-Movie. I'm not entirely sure that was legal, and I think the ticket guy just didn't care, but--"

"Like we've ever given a shit." Max huffed, but she nodded. "But if it makes you feel better, I'll tell him we saw that Mozart movie again."

*“Amadeus.”* El corrected her- she’d liked the movie a bit better than a bored Max had- and after a second, she glanced away and asked, “Have... Have you heard from your parents?”

“Still looking for Billy.” Max rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I figured they’d come back after a few weeks. My current theory is that my Stepdad did something illegal and they’re on the run.”

“Pfft, I think Dad would be able to tell you if that happened.” El said. “Mostly cause than he’d legally adopt you.”

“Or maybe they’d just ship me back to California.” Max suggested, staring off into the distance. “I don’t think my Dad would know what to do with me, though. He hasn’t seen me since, like, two Christmases ago.”

“Man, you’d have some wild stuff to tell him, wouldn’t you?” El giggled. “You think he’d believe you?”

“Hell no.” Max snorted. “I mean, who would?”

El paused, about to say something, but instead she just stared over Max’s shoulder, looking into the distance. “El?” Max asked.

El glanced to her, then again to the distance. Max knew what this meant, and she was dreading it. “I’ll be right back.” El finally said, and rushed off without another word.

“Shit, El!” Max yelled, watching her turn a corner. This had happened the last couple weeks, and she was starting to get quite tired of it. She started to run after her, but when she turned around the corner of the building, she found herself freeze in place.

El was gone. Everyone was gone. The street was empty, and with a sound like a clash of thunder, the world turned dark.

It was suddenly blue, and cold, and wet. Max started walking forwards, staring up at the sky, her eyes wide. She started to shake, not just from the sudden cold, but from the terror that was gripping her from the core. Up in the sky, clouds appeared, rumbling and flashing with red. Something was up there, something dark and blocking parts of the sky. Max tried to look at it, tried to focus, but...

“Max?”

Max blinked, and suddenly the world was back to normal. Heat hit her like a blast of air, and she stumbled backwards, trying to re-adjust. She first noticed El standing in front of her, looking concerned. She shook her head to clear it, and said, “Sorry, I... I just kinda spaced out. What happened? Did you see something?”

El shook her head. “No, I... I thought I saw something, but... I was wrong, it’s nothing.” Of course. It always was. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Max nodded, forcing a smile onto her face. “Yeah, yeah. Hey, let’s get back to the front of the theater. If your Dad thinks we wandered off again, we’re gonna literally die.”

“Yeah.” El nodded, still glancing behind her, as if hoping somebody would come back towards her.

Max didn’t ask about this behavior- she knew exactly what her friend thought she’d seen, who she was hoping would show up. Who she’d been hoping would show up for a year now, and who she thought she had been seeing for a long while. And, well, she didn’t want to be the one to tell El that they weren’t coming back.

Though, honestly, she’d sooner tell her that then tell her what she’d just seen.

“Do you think anyone else saw the movie?” Max asked, shouldering her bag.

The two had just entered the school building, and Max was hoping that a normal, happy conversation would help distract herself from the stares she still got whenever she passed by everybody else.

“Hmm, maybe.” El said, glancing up at the ceiling. “I mean, it was only released, like, four days ago.”

“I mean, it’s also Rated R.” Max added.

“As if that stopped us.” El shrugged. “Hey, see you in Math Class! Don’t go all Terminator on the Bio teacher, kay?”

“I will make an attempt, but not a promise.”

“Good enough.” El smiled, gave her a quick punch in the shoulder, and ran off to find her own locker.

Max turned around, letting her smile drop once El was out of sight. She turned around, managing to catch a couple of kids staring at her some more. She glared, flipped them off, and turned back to her own locker.

Unfortunately, once she opened her locker door, a paper flew into her face.

She let out a quiet “shit”, then grabbed the paper before it hit the floor and flipped it over, glaring down at the image.

It was an article she recognized, the article that stared her in the face every day for the first month she’d returned. The clipping titled “The Girl Who Came Back to Life!”, with her school picture off to the side, and a story about how she’d been found in the woods, half-dead and freezing, something she *definitely* wanted to be reminded of, thanks for that. However, the article in her hands had been written over; the title was crossed out with a green marker, a *Zombie Girl* written over it, and “X”s drawn in her eyes. She stared down at it for a minute, feeling her breath catch in her throat. She paused, then shoved the paper into her jacket pocket, shrugging it off and grabbing her books, hoping nobody was noticing her shaking as the bell rung.

“Punch anyone in the face today?”

Max glanced over her shoulder at El, smiling at her and slowing her skateboard. “Nope, but it’s still early.”

She kicked her board up, grabbing it in her hands and moving to sit on the steps with El, looking across the parking lot at the other kids, who were rushing around, for once not staring at Max as they passed.

“Classes boring?” Max asked.

“Always.” El rolled her eyes. “I mean, obviously Mr. Clarke’s is fun, but all the classes without you are dull. I mean, what’s the point of having to listen to a teacher if there’s not the constant threat of a note being tossed at the back of your head?”

Max laughed a little, reaching her hand into her pocket to feel the newspaper clipping. Should she... no, no, she didn’t want to bother El about it.

“You okay?” El asked, looking up. Damn it, El always knew when she wasn’t feeling great.

Max tried to think of something to say, eventually deciding on redirecting the conversation. “Have... have you heard anything from them?”

El didn’t look her in the eye as she shook her head, glancing down at the ground. “What do you think?”

“Sorry.” Max said.

They sat in silence for a bit, til Max decided to say, “Look, uh... today...” El looked back up at her, and Max kept stuttering, “Today, when I-”

“Maxine Mayfield?”

Max and El looked up sharply, and saw one of the teachers beside her. “Chief Hopper is here?”

El glanced at Max, with a sad look on her face. “You have an appointment today?”

Max bit her lip and nodded.

“I can come with you, if you want.”

She shook her head. “You know they probably won’t let you in, after that shit you pulled last year. Have fun with the Byers.”

El gave her a quick hug, before Max left with the teacher. She glanced over her shoulder, to see her best friend watching her go. Everyone else was watching, too. Everyone was always watching her.

She looked away.

### 3. The Appointment

#### CHAPTER THREE

##### *The Appointment*

Whenever Max had an appointment, she would get picked up early from school by Hopper, and El would go home with Joyce Byers until they were done. The drive was pretty long, and Max tended to stare out the window, trying to get her mind off of things.

Hopper glanced over at her, and said, “You know I’ll be right there if you need me.”

Max nodded quietly.

“And if they’re being dicks, you let me know.”

“Why would I not?” Max snorted.

Hopper laughed, too, and said, “Remember, it’s no big deal. They just wanna know what you saw. So long as you’re honest and all that shit, you’ll be fine.”

“How was work?” Max asked, redirecting the conversation as fast as she could.

“Weird shit.” Hopper admitted. “Someone poisoned a pumpkin patch, and that Conspiracy Nut came in again. He’s under the impression that the Boys were Russian Experiments.”

“Great.” Max rolled her eyes. Even people she didn’t know couldn’t shut up about the boys.

The car pulled up to the parking lot then, and Max looked up to see Hawkins Lab looming above them.

“Just Great.”



She did everything she was supposed to. She got on the scales, she got her blood drawn, she let them put wires on her head, she even bit back a few sarcastic remarks, just to see if maybe they'd let her leave faster that way.

She was sitting on the chair, Hopper beside her, when Dr. Owens came in. "Hey, Mad Max!" he said, and Max really wished she hadn't told him her preferred nickname. "How are ya?"

Max just glared at him.

Owens nodded to Hopper, then said, "Well, let's see what's going on here."

Max never liked his tone of voice when he talked to her. He acted like he was talking to a six-year-old who was scared of getting vaccines, not a thirteen-year-old who made it out of Hell unscathed. Gosh, couldn't he just treat her like an adult for once?

The Doctor flipped through the files. "Hmm, shaved off a pound since I saw you last. Saving for all that Halloween candy?"

Shit, tomorrow was Halloween, wasn't it? Max kept glaring at him, hoping he didn't know she'd forgotten.

"What's your favorite candy? Desert island candy, if you had to pick one?"

Max glanced at Hopper, who shrugged at her. She turned back to Owens and said, "The blood of my enemies."

"Same as your favorite food, then." Owens shrugged. "All right, so tell me what's going on with you. Tell me about your episode."

"Well, El and I were outside the movie theater, and people were there, and then they weren't." Max said, not entirely sure what he wanted her to say. "And then I was back there."

"The Upside-Down?"

Max nodded, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

“Alright, so what happened next?”

“I heard this noise, and there was something in the sky.”

“Something?”

“There was a storm.” Max said.

“So, how did you feel when you saw the storm?”

Damn, she hated talking about feelings. “Frozen.” she ended up saying.

“Heart racing?”

“Just frozen.”

“Frozen? Cold-frozen?”

“No, Scared-frozen.” Max said. “When you can’t breathe or talk or anything, and then I felt... I felt this thing looking at me.”

“Thing?”

“This... evil.”

“Evil?” There we go; he finally dropped his little-kid voice, sounding interested. “What do you think this evil wanted?”

That was something Max knew; she didn’t know how, though. “To kill.”

She could tell Hopper had stiffened beside her, and she saw a flash of something in Owens’s eyes. “To kill you?”

“Not me.” Max said, trying to keep her expression neutral so he didn’t pick up on her fear rising. “Everyone else.”

“Is he home?”

Joyce had stopped the car, and El looked up at the Byers house. It was quite small, and El had already gotten out, staring ahead at the door.

It took Joyce a second to respond, after she glanced around and made sure that nobody else was around. "Of course."

"Is today a... a good day?" El asked. There had been days, of course, that he'd gone nonverbal, or just not been in the mood for a visitor, but Bad Days tended to be when he wouldn't stop crying, when he locked himself in his room and had a panic attack because he heard a suspicious tapping on the window, when he would scream and cry and wouldn't talk to anybody but his Mother and Jonathan. El hadn't been there for a lot of Bad Days, but really, she was only at the house every now and again, when Max was at her appointment.

"I think so, yes." Joyce nodded. "We'll have to see."

They walked into the house, and El tossed her bag to the floor; she was supposed to be doing homework, but she liked waiting for Max to do it.

She waited for Joyce to knock on the Office Door. It a secret knock, one that was Morse Code for something, but El thought it would be rude to translate for herself; it was a knock that was between Joyce and her son.

-- -- --

There was a tapping response.

-- ● --- --- - ● ●

Joyce smiled, and in a second, the door was unlocked, and Will rushed out, giving his Mom a hug. It took him a minute to see El, and when he did, he backed up a little- El was happy to see that it was more out of shyness than fear.

"El's here today," Joyce explained to him, "For about an hour. Would it be okay if she hung out with you for a bit?"

Will nodded, smiling a little and holding out his hand for her. El took

it, and Will dragged her into the room that used to be an Office, running to his bed and holding up a drawing for her.

“Did you make this since I was here last?” El asked, smiling at the doodle of a forest. “This is really good!”

Will smiled, and handed her some blank paper he kept on the table by his bed, pointing to the drawer where he kept his crayons. It was their regular routine, and it seemed to make both of them feel better, especially on Will’s nonverbal days. They wouldn’t have to talk, or think about their issues. They just had to draw.

“What’d he say?” Max asked, as they walked out of the hospital.

“Told me about this ‘anniversary effect.’” Hopper said. “Said that it happens with PTSD and stuff. It’ll be pretty bad, but it’ll end eventually.”

“Great, can we skip to that part?” Max asked, walking to her side of the car and throwing open the door.

“Listen, I know it sounds dumb, but this ‘PTSD’, it’s a real thing.” Hopper said as he also entered the car. “And it’s not cause you did anything wrong, even soldiers get it sometimes.”

“I know.” Max said, shutting the door and turning so that she was looking out the window.

“And if that stuff does get worse, you tell me, okay?”

“Mm-hmm.” Max nodded.

“Max, really. Even if it’s something you don’t want me to tell the Lab, you can tell me.”

“Yep.”

She felt a little guilty; she knew he was trying to help, but he’d only been in the Upside-Down for maybe an hour. She’d been there a week. He didn’t *get* it. Nobody got it.

She shut her eyes and tried to fall asleep as the car drove away.

“Sweetheart? Nancy’s here to pick up El.”

Will looked up, a little disappointed to hear the whispered news, but nodded at his Mom and turned to the girl sitting on the floor. She held up her drawing, which was a wild storm of colors. Will smiled at her, and said, “Pretty!”

El paused a little, seemingly thrown off by the word, before she smiled at him and nodded. “Is yours done?”

He shook his head; she knew he didn’t like to show people his drawings until he was done. So, she smiled at him and dropped her own drawing on his bed. “Keep it.” she said, glancing around and smiling at Joyce, who was waiting in the doorway. “I’ll be right out, Ms. Byers.”

She nodded and left, probably to talk to Nancy, who would be waiting in the hall. She would drive El home and wait with her until Max and Hopper arrived; however, she didn’t know that there was anyone else was in the Byers house. It was better that way.

El glanced at him and said, “Uh, Max is probably good now. Do... do you want to meet her? At some point?”

Will shook his head. “Not safe.”

“She’s safe, really.” El said. “She knows you exist and she hasn’t told anyone.”

Will just kept shaking his head. His Family and the Hoppers were the only ones who knew where he was, and even though Max had been entrusted with the information, she hadn’t actually met him. Will thought that was the safest option; the fewer people who knew him, the fewer people would be in danger if he was ever found.

“I... well, if you say so.” El said, then asked, “Did you hear anything from the Others?”

“No.” Will said quietly. He saw her face fall, and his own heart sank whenever he thought about his lost brothers. He hadn’t heard from them in almost a *year*, and he wished they could at least send him a message. Just once, so he knew where they were.

“Hey, I’ll probably see you soon.” El smiled. “And you can show me your new drawing, huh?”

Will nodded, and El grinned at him and left, waving goodbye once she made it to the doorway. She heard her yell something at Nancy- for some reason, sarcastic remarks were considered standard greetings for the Hoppers, something Will didn’t understand- and Nancy respond in return. He sighed, and turned back to his drawing, which was half-finished, his crayons spread around it. It was a drawing of a girl, a girl he hadn’t seen in a long time. He couldn’t quite remember her eye color, or how long her hair actually was, but he remembered the important things: how her face was shaped, the way her braids rested against her back, and the number tattooed on her arm.

## 4. Conversations

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### *Conversations*

Nancy glanced at El, who was digging through her bag. She'd been doing that for the last ten minutes of their drive.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked.

El snorted. "Are *you*?"

Nancy knew better than to answer that honestly. "Okay, what's up with you today?"

She sighed, and then said, "This is the second episode Max has had this week. It's been getting more frequent."

"Do you think..." Nancy paused, wondering what she was supposed to say. She had no idea how to talk to a kid whose best friend went to another world and back. "Do you think something's wrong?"

"Of course something's wrong, something's *always* wrong." El sighed, dropping her bag to the car floor and glaring out the window.

They drove for about another minute in silence, before El asked, "Are you worried about her, too?"

Nancy hesitated, before responding, "Of course I am. But your Dad knows what he's doing. She'll be alright, El."

El didn't respond to that, instead saying, "So, did you cut your hair yourself, or did you have someone else do it?"

Nancy paused for a second, confused at the sudden turn in the conversation, then laughed. "I chopped it off on my own. Wanted to see if my parents would notice."

“Did they?”

“What do you think?”

El smiled over at her. “Well, Max and I noticed.”

Nancy remembered that; she remembered the kids showing up for their tutoring session, and Max saying almost immediately, “What the *hell* happened to your head?” That had caused all three of them to start laughing together, for the first time in quite a long time.

The two of them waited outside until Hopper and Max drove up to the house. El rushed out to give Max a hug the second she got out of the car, asking what had happened and if she was okay. Nancy just nodded and waved at Hopper, before getting back into the car and driving away. It was one of the Dinner Days, and she was going to go pick up Steve. Well, she figured she should; she *was* driving *his* car, after all. Her parents would, under no circumstances, let her have her own. Even if they cared enough to notice she had her license, her Mom would say some bullshit about statistics on teen driving, while her Dad would talk financials and how they couldn’t afford another car. And like *hell* her Dad would let her use his.

She supposed her parents cared about her, in their own way, but it was still difficult to be home with them. Her friends’ parents had always been worried when they were late, wanted to know where they were, had an interest in their kids’ activities. Her Dad couldn’t care less what she did so long as it didn’t involve him, and when her Mom thought to grace her with some attention, it was by constantly reminding her of every way she could die in anything she did. She always felt like her Mom wanted to say more, like there was some sort of parental love hiding inside her and maybe Nancy could do something to bring it out. But, well, the only person who seemed to get attention in the house now was Holly, who was smothered by her Mom all day. Nancy wasn’t bitter or anything, but she often wondered what made Holly so different, what got her the attention while Nancy just got a pat on the back and a push out the door.

She got back to Steve’s house and switched seats so he could drive,



and then they went to Barb's house. Well, it was Barb's house, she reminded herself with a sting of pain. Her parents still lived there, and there were memories of Barb everywhere, from photos to drawings to her favorite books laid out in the hall, something Nancy couldn't imagine her own parents doing. Barb's memory was laid out across every surface of the house, but that was just what it was: memories. Barb was gone, and her parents had no idea. Nancy was reminded of that over dinner, when they told her that they had hired some Inspector Guy to find her, and that they were selling their house, and she had to slip off to the bathroom to cry for five minutes before she had to return and pretend that everything was fine.

*Everything was fine.*

Steve didn't say anything until the drive home, and then he asked, "You're gonna be pissed about that guy, aren't you?"

Nancy nodded.

"Look... I know it sucks, but it's not like he'll find anything that'll... that'll actually be true. The Lab is a shitstorm, but it covers up its tracks pretty well."

"They're selling their house to find her." Nancy said quietly. "And they'll *never* find her."

"It's bullshit, I know." Steve said.

Nancy paused, and asked, "Do you miss them?"

"Who? Barb?"

She glanced at him. "You know *exactly* who I mean."

He took a deep breath, still staring ahead at the road and not looking at her. "Of course I do. And every day, I blame myself for not being there. I just... if I had been there, maybe they wouldn't have had to leave. But there's nothing we can do, Nance."

*Nothing.*

Nancy never liked being told she could do nothing, but for now, she

just stared out the window.

“So it’s just because of the anniversary shit?”

Max nodded, glaring down at her Math textbook as if she could finish the math problems just by the intensity of her stare.

“God, that’s some bullshit.” El sighed.

“It’s better than the alternative.” Max said.

“And what’s that?”

Max didn’t say; she didn’t *want* to say. Instead, she asked, “So, what happened while I was gone, Player Two?”

“Well, uh, Ms. Byers was nice. Still not sure if she’s dating Dad or not. And Will was nice. He’s still a little scared, though, of being found out.” El glanced at her again, then said, “I told him you’d be safe, but I think he’s scared that his bad luck’ll rub off on you.”

“Tell him I’ll be fine, I can’t get any worse luck than I already have.” Max shrugged.

“Max...” El began, but Max simply reached into her pocket and tossed her a piece of paper. El looked down at it, first surprised, then angry. “Who did this?”

“Some asshole.” Max shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. That’s how all the kids see me, anyway. The Zombie Girl.”

“Hey, hey!” El said, reaching out and grabbing Max’s hand. “Zombies are cool. You’re cool. And who gives a damn what they think about you? You survived in Hell for a week, they’d all be dead in five minutes.”

Max smiled. “Ooh, I’d like to image Troy trying to shoot the Demogorgon.” After a second, though, her face fell again. “Still, though... I dunno if I could really wish *that* bullshit on him. On *anyone*.”

“That’s good.” El said. “Means you’re a decent freaking person. But, uh, I want you to know...” she paused, glancing down at the paper, before ripping it in half and tossing it to the ground. “I would go into the Upside-Down for you, Player One.”

Max smiled at her. “Thanks, El.”

“Now,” El said, picking up the Math book, “Wanna give up on this and eat ice cream for dinner?”

“Hell yeah!” Max laughed, and the two girls left the room, abandoning the newspaper clipping on the floor.

## 5. Inside

### Notes for the Chapter:

... I love you guys so much :)

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### *Inside*

El waited until Max was asleep to go upstairs.

She wasn't sure if her Dad was asleep yet- probably not, knowing him- but she could pretty quickly slip past his room and to the trapdoor that led to the attic. Over the past year, she'd gotten pretty good at getting to and from the attic in silence.

She climbed in very quickly, shutting the door and glancing around. The room had been re-organized, and some of the boxes were gone: her DnD box was now under her bed, the box of Hopper's old clothes had been smuggled to Joyce's house, and El's old books had been moved to the inside of the Blanket Fort- which El had refused to take down or move. She glanced around one more time, to the large, empty room, and then ducked into the fort itself.

Her books were in the corner, with *Peter Pan* placed on top, and her Walkie-Talkie was on top of a pillow. She sat down, picked it up, and started to talk. "It's Day three-hundred and fifty-two. Ten PM. Are... are you there?"

She shut her eyes and listened, only hearing the buzz of the Walkie-Talkie.

"We had another interesting science class. Talked about the brain. Max had another appointment. I can't say much, in case this message is intercepted, but I really think the doctors are bullshitting her. She seems to think something's wrong, but she won't admit it. And, well, you know how well *they* help people."

She paused, then added, with a slight desperation to her voice, "Listen, if you're out there, say something. I won't say anything, if you don't want. I just want to know that you're okay, that you're..."

El took a deep breath, and listened some more. Nothing. She should have expected that. She never heard anything.

She put the Walkie-Talkie down and went back to her room.

It was three hours later when Max woke up.

She glanced around the room, rubbing her eyes and trying to focus. What *time* was it? She could see El, asleep in her own bed, and a clock flickering on one of the shelves. *I AM? Really?*

Max sighed and stood up. While she was awake, she might as well use the bathroom.

She heard the thunder while she was washing her hands.

She froze when the sound hit her ears, her entire body going numb with panic. The water ran over her fingers, but she could barely feel it. And suddenly, she *couldn't* feel it. The water had stopped, because the room had gone dark.

Max stumbled backwards, wildly looking around the room that had suddenly shifted into the Upside-Down. Her feet started to move before she could even think, running as fast as she could. She skidded to a stop in the hall, right above the staircase that led down to the foyer. The door had swung open, and something was storming outside.

She slowly walked down the stairs, transfixed by the clouds outside. They were dark blue and flashing red, and the *Thing* was back. She stood in the doorway, staring outside, as the light flashed again, and she could see a dark black shape, with its split legs and no face, slowly turn towards her.

In a flash, everything was gone again, and she was in her nightgown, standing in the doorway, staring into the night.

She couldn't tell Hopper. Even if she asked him not to tell the Lab, two Episodes in two days would just worry him. She didn't want to be a bother, and she could take care of herself.

Slowly, she stepped backwards and shut the door.

Nancy was alone in the woods.

She knew that if anyone knew she was walking alone in the forest at night, she'd get the scolding of a lifetime, especially after everything that had happened last year. But she didn't care; besides, she wouldn't get caught. The only people who cared enough about her- and would be able to notice she was gone- lived somewhere else, and they wouldn't be able to sneak around at night, either.

She had a thick bag over her shoulder and a flashlight in her hand, walking forwards. It wasn't that late, really, but she wanted to make sure she'd be able to see should she stay later than anticipated.

Up ahead on the path was a small treehouse. Her Dad had paid someone to build it when she was nine and asked for one, but neither he nor Mom ever wanted to take her all the way in the forest to use it, so she used to go after school, until she got to High School and had more important things to worry about, like College and boyfriends and alternate dimensions. She hadn't been the woods in years, until...

Nancy was about to climb up the ladder, when she spotted something on the ground. She bent down to pick it up, and let out a long groan when she realized what it was. She shoved the flashlight into her bag and rushed up the ladder, knocking on the door in a specific pattern.

● - - - - ● - - - -

The bolt holding the door locked from the inside slid away, and Nancy burst in, waving the item she found on the ground. "Hey, dipshit, wanna tell me why you decided to throw a cereal box out the window?"

She glanced around the treehouse, waiting for a response. It was lit well with about a million lamps, with books lining the floors and

shelves, a table in the center and two folding chairs next to it. There was a ladder that led up to a small second-story, where Nancy shot her glare.

“Come on down, seriously.”

“It’s gross!” came a voice from above her. “Tastes like cardboard.”

“So you know what cardboard tastes like?”

“I decided to eat the box instead. Tasted the same.”

Nancy sighed, glancing away from the hole in the ceiling and setting some stuff on the table. “Look, I’ve got your goddamn waffles, but you can’t just throw things you don’t like out the window. You don’t want bears to show up.”

She heard a thud behind her, and knew that he’d jumped down the hole instead of using the ladder. Of course he did.

She sat in one of the folding chairs, and looked up as Mike sat across from her.

He looked a lot different from the year before; he wasn’t unearthly pale anymore, having gotten quite a lot of sun, and his hair had grown back, flopping onto his face. She’d cut his bangs herself because he’d asked her to, and managed to accidentally get some of her curls caught up in the scissors. Well, she looked better with short hair anyway.

“Bears?” Mike asked.

“You know what those are, don’t play dumb.” Nancy glared at him. “You’ve read *A Winter’s Tale*, and you’ve got a dictionary.”

“They’re asleep, it’s cold.” Mike huffed.

“Not cold enough.” Nancy said, and dug in her bag, tossing him a ziplock of Eggos stuck together with Peanut Butter, noticing his face light up as he caught it. “And they’re not the only animals in the woods- we’ve got raccoons, owls that’ll attack you for no reason, and assholes in suits who would definitely notice a cereal box on the

floor. Got it?”

Mike nodded and smiled at her, probably not paying attention to her words, instead looking down at the food. “Thank you.”

Nancy pulled a bag of chips for herself out of her bag, and the two of them ate in silence.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry this one's pretty short, but the next chapters start getting longer, don't worry :D



## 6. Ghost

### CHAPTER SIX

#### *Ghost*

*“El!”*

*Mike was running. He was running through the school hallways, but not the school hallways. It was dark, and blue, and cold, and he was on the Other Side. He was on the Other Side and he had to get out.*

*“El!” he screamed. “Lucas! Dustin! Twelve! El! EL!”*

*He heard muffled footsteps and shouts, and turned that way. He didn’t know who was there, but he needed to find someone. Maybe they knew the way out.*

*He stopped at a wall, seeing a red, throbbing spot that looked like it was made of wet string. He thought he saw shadows behind it, and focused on it, holding his hand out. The string started to come undone, dropping and revealing some clear goo substance. Mike took a deep breath and pushed through, flinching at the slime that stuck to his face and his clothes. He kept pushing until he felt himself fall, falling through the slime, and land hard on the ground. It was much warmer, and when Mike opened his eyes, he saw white instead of blue.*

*He slowly turned around, and saw the wall close up behind him.*

*He was out.*

*He started to move very soon, heading to the Hopper House. He wanted to see her, he wanted to see El.*

*But when he got to the House, El wasn’t there. Neither was her Dad, or his friends. But the Bad People were. The Bad People were in her house- her house- and he could only stare through the window for a few moments*

*before having to run. He didn't want them to spot him. Had they found El? Had they found the others? He didn't know. But he did know it wasn't safe anymore. He had to run.*

*So he stayed in the woods. For days and days, until he could barely count how many nights. He had to steal a coat from someone in the woods, started killing and eating the small animals he saw. He started fires with his powers, slept in hollow trees, did all he could to survive. He didn't try to go back to the Hopper House. If the Bad People had gotten into the House, then it wasn't safe. And if they found him in the Hopper House, they would find El, too, and they'd put her in trouble.*

*But he had a friend that could help him. One day, he found a box in the woods that had an Eggo inside, wrapped in tinfoil. He thought maybe that was just a thing people did, and took it, but about a week later, he found two more, stuck together with peanut butter. El had told him she was the only one who liked that- which he didn't understand, it tasted great .*

*So he started staking out the box, waiting for someone to return. And eventually, someone did. He'd been asleep behind a bush when he was jolted awake by footsteps. Peering through the branches, he spotted Nancy- his friend , Nancy- opening the box. He waited until she left to look again, and yes , she'd left him more food. He started running after her, and managed to catch up right as she reached a road. She turned around, hearing him move through the trees. Mike had frozen, panicking and wondering if maybe he had been wrong, maybe she didn't want to see him, maybe she would just scream and turn him in...*

*Instead, she waved at him, a small smile on her face. "Come with me," she said, and he did.*

*"I haven't been here for years, so there might be bugs and shit." Nancy apologized, lighting a candle. "And make sure that this doesn't get knocked over, it'll burn the hell outta this tree."*

*Mike didn't really understand what she meant, but he nodded and looked around the dusty room.*

*"There's not much here," Nancy said quietly, "But we can fix it up,*

*right?”*

*“Fix?” Mike asked, the first time he’d spoken the entire way over.*

*Nancy smiled at him. “Yeah. Make it better. I’ve got some emergency blankets in the car that I can bring up for you, and I can get you more later. And I’ll get you food and clothes and shit. It’ll be a nice little home, for the time being, anyway.”*

*“Home.” Mike repeated, staring up at her.*

*She reached forwards, grabbing his hand and nodding. “Yeah. Home.”*

“Okay, we’re ready!” El called up the stairs.

Her and Max were standing in front of the doorway, already in their Halloween costumes and ready for Hopper to drop them off at school.

The costumes had been Max’s idea- of course they were, she had so many ideas. El had been sitting across from her at the Library, saying that it sucked they couldn’t dress up as Ghostbusters for Halloween because they were all boys.

“Why can’t we?” Max had asked, staring back at her.

They’d worked together, failed at sewing, convinced Nancy to help them fix their mistakes, and now had their full Ghostbusters Uniforms- El’s nametag was labelled with *Melnitz*, and Max’s with *Barrett*.

“I am so ready to go trick-or-treating.” Max said. “Let’s skip school and go right now. We can beat the rush.”

“Hmm, I doubt the adults would like that very much.” El said.

Max shrugged. “Who gives a damn?”

“Pretty sure that Dad would.” El gave her a look.

Max laughed a little, hoping that it didn’t sound too awkward. She

kinda wanted to skip school today, but she didn't really want to let it come across that she wasn't joking. She just didn't think she'd be able to pay attention today.

Well, at least the rest of the school would be dressed up, right?

Nancy climbed in the treehouse, turning to the wall to place her bag against it. When she turned around, she jumped and screamed. "Jesus!"

Mike looked up at her, a sheet-ghost costume covering him. "Ghost." he said.

"Yeah, I see that." Nancy said, pushing past him and placing a box of food on the table.

"Halloween."

"Yeah, it is."

"Trick-or-treat."

Nancy paused, turning back towards the boy. "Sorry?"

"Trick-or-treat."

"You... you think you're gonna go trick-or-treating?"

Mike's heart skipped a beat. Was that a No? "They wouldn't see me." he said.

"Mike..." Nancy said, kneeling down to his eye-level, and catching his glare from behind the sheet. "What did I say?"

"They wouldn't see me-"

"I said we're under surveillance. We can't go anywhere, we can't see anyone."

"But they wouldn't-"

“Mike. You’re not going anywhere.”

“But-”

“We wanna be safe, don’t we? We’re gonna be safe.”

Mike glared at her harder, then said bitterly, “Safe.”

“Good. I brought you breakfast.” Nancy said, turning around.

As she did, Mike ripped the sheet off, dropping it to the floor and glaring down at it.

“Wait, did you make that out of one of your blankets?” Nancy asked, turning around suddenly. “Dude, I can’t keep sneaking you new ones!”

“It’s only a little cut!” Mike argued. “I’ll be fine!”

“Damn it, Mike!”

## 7. Halfway Happy

### Notes for the Chapter:

Posting a little early today cause I have family coming over. Happy Christmas Eve Eve!

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### *Halfway Happy*

“It’s a conspiracy, I swear.”

Max was kicking her skateboard down the sidewalk, glancing back at El on her bike. Neither girl was moving as fast as they normally did, and kept trying to avoid looking at the normally-dressed children.

“Everyone dressed up last year, I don’t get it.” El shook her head.

“I had to punch two guys for saying that the girls weren’t ‘real Ghostbusters.’” Max sighed. “Listen, Dana got freaking possessed, I think she should get a goddamn uniform. And besides, accuracy wasn’t the *point*.”

“Yeah, I-” El began, but she stopped. Across the otherwise empty street, she thought she saw a flicker of movement. She stared, slowly getting off her bike.

“El?”

“I thought I saw someone.”

She didn’t notice Max bite her lip and stare at the ground behind her as she slowly started approaching the street, considering crossing. However, a car rushed by, and she jumped back, almost hitting Max as she did. El looked across the road again, and nothing moved.

“Let’s go.” El said, and hopped back on her bike. She glanced back a few times, and still saw nothing.

Mike was reading.

It was all he could do, really. Sure, Nancy sometimes brought him crayons and half-finished coloring books, but he wasn't very good at staying in the lines, though he could practice his handwriting. She taught him how to sew, but there wasn't much to sew in the treehouse. And practicing his powers didn't really make him happy.

But Nancy brought him books. She always brought him books she would smuggle out of her closet, ones she hadn't read in years, or ones that she would find in the back of the school, abandoned and lost. She had to bring him a dictionary after the first week, when he kept asking for definitions of words- he had an entire list written on the pad of paper she'd left there. So he'd sit on the pile of blankets, an open dictionary off to the side as he poured through a story.

Nancy had to separate the "fiction" from the "nonfiction", because he wasn't quite sure which was which yet. He liked them both- the world was such a fascinating place, and yet make-believe worlds were amazing too- but he liked the Fantasy Books best. He liked the idea of Dragons and Swordfights and Magicians and, well, most of those books had a lot of romance. He liked romance stories.

He was reading one right now, and he stared down at the pages, trying to forget about his less-than-amazing morning.

*"You're just crazy if you think she's going to be happy in some run-down farmhouse in America. Not with what she spends on clothes."*

*"Stop talking about the Countess! As a special favor. Before you drive me maaaaaaaad."*

Mike slowly mouthed "maaaaaaad", wondering why there had to be so many "a"s.

*Buttercup looked at him.*

*"Don't you understand anything that's going on?"*

*Buttercup shook her head.*

Westley shook his too. *"You have never been the brightest, I guess."*

"That's not very nice." Mike said to himself.

*"Do you love me, Westley? Is that it?"*

*He couldn't believe it. "Do I love you? My God, if your love were a grain of sand, mine would be a universe of beaches. If your love were-*

*"A universe of beaches." Mike repeated to himself. That was good. He had to remember that.*

*"I don't understand that first one yet," Buttercup interrupted. She was starting to get very excited now. "Let me get this straight. Are you saying my love is the size of a grain of sand and yours is the other thing? Images just confuse me so- is this universal business of yours bigger than my sand? Help me, Westley. I have the feeling we're on the verge of something just terribly important."*

"We're on the verge of something just terribly important." Mike said. That sounded good, too, even if he wasn't quite sure what it meant.

*"I have stayed these years in my hovel because of you. I have taught myself languages because of you. I have made my body strong because I thought you might be pleased by a strong body. I have lived my life with only the prayer that some sudden dawn you might glance in my direction. I have not known a moment in years when the sight of you did not send my heart careening against my rib cage. I have not known a night when your visage did not accompany me to sleep. There has not been a morning when you did not flutter behind my waking eyelids... Is any of this getting through to you, Buttercup, or do you want me to go on for a while?"*

*"Never stop."*

"Never stop." Mike said. He'd had to pause to look up the words *careening* and *visage*, but it was worth it.

He heard a tapping on the door, and he sighed and glared down at the dictionary. Of course she'd come back. School was over. He sighed and stuck his head down the hole that led to the second floor, staring at the bolt holding the door shut until it moved. He wiped his nosebleed away and ducked back up, crossing his arms and sitting



against the wall.

“Hey, are you pouting up there?” he heard Nancy call. He didn’t respond, just curling up and glaring at the wall. “Look, I just don’t want you to get caught, okay?”

He knew she was being rational, but he didn’t care. He wanted to go trick-or-treating. He wanted to see El.

“Okay, how about a compromise?” Nancy called.

Mike paused, before yelling back, “Compromise?”

“Yeah. Look it up, it’s spelled C-O-M-Promise.”

Mike grabbed his dictionary, flipping through it. Nancy waited on the first floor while he found the word; however, there were a lot of big words in the description. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s like kind of... an agreement, to settle both sides of an argument. Halfway happy.”

“Halfway happy?” Mike repeated.

“Yeah. So, here’s a compromise: I’ve got a party to go to, but I’ll come back by 10:00, and I can bring you a big bag of candy, and I’ll even sleep over here.”

“Sleep over?” That excited Mike. He liked when he wasn’t alone at night; there were usually scary sounds outside, but whenever Nancy slept over, he felt better; she’d be there to protect him from anything. She couldn’t stay, usually: she said that she liked to be Safe, and it was safer if she was at home at night. But, every now and again, she would stay with him.

“Yeah. What do you say?”

As an answer, Mike jumped down the hole, landing in front of Nancy and smiling up at her.

“Halfway Happy.” he said.

Nancy walked back home, her hands in her pockets.

Everytime she closed her eyes, she thought of Barb's parents' hopeful faces as they told her they were going to find their daughter. They were going to sell their house to find her. They were going to do whatever it took, but it wouldn't matter. She was dead, dead and decaying in an alternate world. And Nancy couldn't stop *thinking* about it. How it was her fault- if she had just gone home with Barb, or made sure she left the party alright, or...

She shut her eyes. She couldn't think about that now. She just had to go to a dumb party and be a dumb teenager and not think about all of this shit, and then she had to get back to Mike.

If it wasn't for Mike, she didn't know what she would have done. Would she have just told Barb's parents the truth? Broken the nondisclosure agreement and gotten in trouble with the Lab full of sociopaths? Maybe. Maybe she'd do something that drastic. Maybe she'd just go and burn down the Lab herself. She sure *wanted* to.

But if she did, she'd get investigated. Or she'd get killed. Either way, that left Mike in trouble. And she *couldn't* do anything to hurt that kid. She couldn't bring herself to do that.

So she just sighed and kept walking. Just one night. Just be a dumb teen for one night.

As if being a dumb teen for one night wasn't what had killed Barb.

## 8. Trick or Treat, Freak

### Notes for the Chapter:

Pretty weird how the two chapters that take place on Halloween Night are being published on Christmas and Christmas Eve. :D

This is a little early btw, because, you know, Christmas celebrations involves traveling places...

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### *Trick of Treat, Freak*

“Are you *sure* you don’t want me to go with you?”

El rolled her eyes, unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the door. “*Really*, Dad, we’re *fine*. We’re going to be okay. It’ll just be me and Max going door-to-door like we do every year.”

“Just stay together,” Hopper said, eyeing the two of them, “And stay safe.”

“Divide and conquer and rush into danger.” Max said. “Got it.”

“And get lots of candy.” El added.

“Yes, definitely do that, too.” Hopper said. “I will be at the Station. Call me if you need *anything*.”

“Don’t worry, Dad, we know what we’re doing!” El said. “If Halloween was a video game, we’d have the highscore.”

“Don’t,” Max sighed, “Don’t say that.” El had just sounded like an old person who didn’t know what video games were.

“Okay. Have fun and don’t die.” Hopper said, as the girls jumped out of the car.

“You too!” El called, before watching her Dad drive off. “So, you wanna go to the rich-people houses first?”

“Of course, they’ve got the best candy.” Max said. “Come on, Player Two, let’s go.”

Nancy couldn’t distract herself.

The party was loud, it was wild, it was *insane*.

And she was *still* thinking about Barb.

*She would hate this party*, Nancy thought as she passed through a crowd. *It’s everything she was scared parties would be.*

People were downing alcohol and making out and dancing like animals and playing music so loud she was surprised nobody had called the cops yet. It’s exactly what parties looked like on TV, but she didn’t feel excited. She just felt *lost*. She wandered through a group of teens, making her way to a kitchen counter, where a guy was drinking a cup of punch, the large bowl very close to the edge. “What’s in this?” she asked cautiously.

“Pure fuel!” the guy yelled, obviously drunk as hell. “*Pure fuel!*”

Nancy stared down at it. She’d only had alcohol a couple times before, but it hadn’t been that bad? And, well, if it was a way to get her mind off of things...

“Hey, hey, hey!” she heard Steve say behind her, as she grabbed a cup and filled it with punch, starting to drink it as fast as she could. “Whoa, whoa, take it easy!”

She didn’t *want* to take it easy. She wanted to forget. Forget about everything- about Barb, and the Upside-Down, and the Monster, and the Hollands, and El’s worries and Max’s episodes and her parents and their bullshit, and how she’d never once connected with her family, and how she was raising a kid alone in the woods. She was raising a *kid* that she had to hide from the *government*, and she *still* had to worry about her goddamn homework. It wasn’t *fair*. *Nothing*

was fair.

“Take it easy, Nance, Nance, Nance...”

Nancy turned back to her boyfriend, shooting him a dark look as she re-filled the cup. “We’re just being stupid teenagers for the night. Wasn’t that the deal?”

She downed another cup, and rushed off to dance.

*Stupid Teenagers. For one night.*

“How the *hell* have so few adults seen this damn movie?” Max asked, groaning as she glanced back to the house they’d just left.

“They have *jobs*, Max.” El said. “Jobs that prevent them from seeing masterpieces.”

“When I grow up, I’m not gonna have a job.” Max declared. “I’m just gonna marry a rich person, steal their money, fake my death, and live on a private island.”

“Can I come visit?” El joked, raising an eyebrow.

“Nope.” Max smiled. “Get your own private island, I’m not gonna share.”

The two laughed for a second, and Max pointed at the next house. “Come on, let’s bet. What do you think we’ll get there?”

“Candy.”

“Be *creative*.”

El was about to respond, but then she saw it.

Across the street, a shadow ducked behind a house. She froze, turning towards it. No. No, she was not going to let it get away from her again.

“I’ll be right back,” was all she said, and she took off at a run.

“El!” Max called after her, but she didn’t listen. She *ran*, her bag thumping against her leg as she made it across the street, turning the bend to see somebody run off and duck around the corner of another house, and she followed.

“El!” Max yelled, rushing across the street as her friend disappeared. “El, no, we’ve gotta stay together! *El-*”

She rushed behind a house, and ran straight into a crowd of kids in masks. She jumped back, and heard one of them yell, “Watch it, Zombie girl!”

*What?*

He pushed past her, and another shoved her to the side, yelling, “Trick or Treat, Freak!”

“Boo!” a third yelled, and pushed her down. She lost her footing, and the second she hit the ground, the world turned Upside-Down.

She slowly got to her feet, looking around at the cold, dark world around her. Everyone was gone. “El!” she yelled again, starting to panic. “*El!*”

She thought she heard something, and whipped around, trying to figure out it was. At first, she saw nothing. Then, over the horizon line, something *rose*.

Its legs came first, and then its eyeless head, and the dark creature stared her down. Max stared for a second, then turned and ran.

She didn’t look behind her, even though she could hear it. She just ran, and ducked behind a house, staying behind a wall, curling up and burying her head, shaking all over. She could still hear it, it was still coming, coming for *her*...

“*Max!*”

Max jolted and opened her eyes, and the world was warm again. El was standing over her, looking worried. “Max, what’s wrong? How’d

you get over here? Are you okay?"

Max stared at her for a second, still shaking, before saying, "Where *were* you?"

The question came out much sharper than she'd intended, and El flinched before saying, "I-I thought I saw... but he got away... It doesn't matter, Max-"

"Right." Max nodded, her fear slipping into a cold aggression. "It doesn't matter."

"Max?"

She stood up, shouldering her bag. "Let's just get to the Station. I'm done."

"But we haven't finished the neighborhood."

"I'm bored anyway." Max lied, and she walked off, not caring if El was following her or not.

Mike was waiting.

The wristwatch Nancy gave him flashed *10:00*. It flashed *10:00* an hour ago.

Nancy still wasn't there.

She said *10:00*, and Mike had checked, and he'd written it in his journal, and he'd set up the table to look pretty, and he had asked her to bring makeup so he could practice on himself, and he was going to show her how far his words had come and his new favorite books and tell her all the things he forgot to tell her during her visits.

But she wasn't there.

He didn't cry, not yet. He just groaned and shut his eyes, and stood up. He'd been sitting just in front of the door, waiting for her. He went back up to the second floor, sitting on his blankets and grabbing

a strip of fabric. He'd ripped it from the longest blanket one day, and he slowly tied around his eyes as a blindfold. He shut his eyes and focused. He should probably focus on Nancy, but if she didn't want to come, why would he want to find her? There was one person he wanted to find, though, and she was very easy for him to focus on.

In about a minute, he was in the Mind Place.

It was all dark, but the darkness was a little less scary now that he knew what was coming. He slowly turned, and there she was.

*There she was.*

El Hopper was sitting in the blanket fort, curled up to herself, her walkie-talkie in hand. "It's Day Three-hundred and Fifty-Three," she said.

Mike walked closer, and he wanted to say, *I know. I know it's Day 353. I've been counting, too.*

She was dressed in a uniform, one that she'd described to him a few times in the last week. The Ghostbuster? Mike thought that was what it was. It looked really good, she was really great at sewing. He wished he could have helped.

He was so close to her now, almost right in front of the tent. She didn't look up, she didn't see him. She just kept talking into the communicator, oblivious to his presence.

"I had a shitty day today. I don't know, I... I just wish you were here. I mean, all of you. Lucas and Dustin, I keep thinking I see them, but they're never there. I keep seeing things that aren't *there*, but... but I just *miss* you. Please, if you're out there, just... just give me a sign. I need to see you, I need you, Mike... please..."

She looked up, and Mike's heart skipped. It looked like she was looking at him. He knew she wasn't, knew she couldn't *really* see him, but... God, he wished she could see him.

"El..." he said, as loud as he dared.



"Mike?" she said, and his heart stopped. Had she heard him? Had she *heard him*?

Mike raised his hand, reaching to touch her face. Maybe this time, maybe he could touch her, and he could feel her, and...

El bit her lip and turned away, placing the walkie-talkie back on the pillow and brushing her sleeve across her eyes. She stood up and left the fort, and left Mike behind. He turned to watch her go, watch her disappear into the darkness, and Mike was alone again.

He blinked, and he was back in the treehouse, and he took the blindfold off, and his nose was bleeding, and he was crying. He didn't want to be crying. He grabbed his book off the floor, and he tried to read it, tried to take his mind off of things.

*"You are teasing now; aren't you?"*

*"A little maybe; I've been saying it so long to you, you just wouldn't listen. Every time you said 'Farm Boy do this' you thought I was answering 'As you wish' but that's only because you were hearing wrong. 'I love you' was what it was, but you never heard, and you never heard."*

*"I hear you now, and I promise you this: I will never love anyone else. Only Westley. Until I die."*

*He nodded, and took a step away. "I'll send for you soon. Believe me."*

*"Would my Westley ever lie?"*

*He took another step. "I'm late. I must go. I hate it but I must. The ship sails soon and London is far."*

*"I understand."*

*He reached out with his right hand. Buttercup found it very hard to breathe.*

*"Good-by."*

*She managed to raise her right hand to his. They shook.*

*“Good-by,” he said again.*

*She made a little nod. He took a third step, not turning. She watched him. He turned.*

*And the words ripped out of her: “Without one kiss?”*

*They fell into each other’s arms.*

Mike wasn’t in the mood for reading anymore.

He dropped the book, letting it clatter to the floor, and he curled up, and he sobbed.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Okay, so, here's the dealio. I will probably be able to update tomorrow, but it might be a little late. Also, to celebrate Christmas, I'm also going to post a one-shot that takes place on the Holiday. (We can't have THAT much Halloween on Christmas lol) The One-Shot'll kinda be the start of the unrelated one-shots, but I won't continue them until this one's over.

Also, btw, I LOVE YOU GUYS SO MUCH. Your comments are all so nice and really are the best Christmas Presents, except I get them every day! :D :D :D Thank you all for reading this!

## 9. Will

### Notes for the Chapter:

MERRY CHRISTMAS! Unless you don't celebrate, in which case, Merry Day-off-school-and/or-work!

Posting a little early again, but we'll be back to our regular update schedule tomorrow. And I'll be posting a Christmas-ish-themed one-shot (which I'll link here as soon as I post it). Oddly enough both chapters are from Will's POV, isn't that nice??

Love you all! :D

EDIT: Here's the Christmas one-shot! :D <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13144869/chapters/30065700>

### CHAPTER NINE

*Will*

Will Byers stared at the wall.

He'd checked the calendar that his Mom had given him. In a few weeks, it would be one year since he'd come home.

One full year.

He remembered so clearly, one year ago, watching Mike disappear, having to leave El behind, *choosing* to leave Lucas and Dustin, and coming home. He came home, and Jonathan brought him to his *Mother*, to *Joyce*, and they'd all cried and hugged for what felt like forever.

And then Joyce had cleaned him up, and gave him Jonathan's smallest clothes until she could find something that fit him, and she let him sleep in her bed, and it felt like a *cloud* compared to what

he'd slept on before, and she even let him sleep in the next morning and made him breakfast. He'd sat at a table and she brought him food, and he actually ate it, though he felt bad instantly when he did; he wouldn't have any to save for the rest of the day, or for tomorrow if his Mom forgot.

He'd been surprised, of course, when later, his Mom gave him more food.

He'd just looked at her from the floor in shock when she brought him a plate in the Office, where Jonathan was setting up a cot for him until they could find something better. "What's this?" he asked, looking down at the plate as if it was a trap.

"It's Lunch." she just said carefully. "It's just a TV Dinner, but if you don't-"

"I had my food today."

She just stared at him, confused, and even Jonathan had turned around. "What do you mean, sweetheart?"

Will struggled to form the words. He really disliked talking- all his talking before then was usually forced out of him, to describe the light he saw, to describe what he thought it meant, to ask that they *please* not throw him in Solitary again. He liked talking around his Mom, though. She never once seemed like she wanted to hurt him- Jonathan was like that, too, and now he was his *brother*.

"I had my food today." he simply repeated, not sure what she was getting at.

"Honey, that was just breakfast." Joyce said, until it slowly dawned on her. "Will, did they only give you food once a day?"

Will flinched, looking down at the ground. "I-if they remembered."

"If they..." Joyce trailed off, before dropping his plate in front of him and saying, "I'm going to kill them, Jesus... Will, you can have as much food as you want. Whenever you want, just open the fridge."

"Whenever..." Will's eyes widened. *Whenever you want.*

And the new, nice things he could do didn't stop there. He was allowed to sleep whenever he wanted. His Mom and Jonathan didn't get mad whenever he went nonverbal for a day, wouldn't force him to apologize whenever he had a meltdown. Eventually, Joyce asked if El's Dad could know where he was.

"I think I might be able to ask him for some clothes for you. I don't want the Bad People seeing me buy small boys' clothes, but Hop could probably bring some over."

Will agreed; he trusted Hopper, he had a good Aura, and he trusted El. And, well, they'd already met him. If they were in any danger because of him, there was nothing he could do for them now.

Hopper came over, and El came with him, and El just ran forwards and hugged Will. He'd jumped, but he hugged her back. "It's nice to see you." El said, pulling away. "I heard your name's Will. That's better than anything I coulda come up with."

Will nodded. "I like Will."

El jumped, and Will remembered that she'd never heard him speak before; he laughed a little and gave her another hug.

She visited every now and again; not as much as either of them wanted, but only when anybody watching her wouldn't get suspicious of her visiting the house of an adult woman and teenager she barely knew.

Will lived in the Office. Joyce and Jonathan and Hopper figured out how to build a bed that they could push up into the wall if need be, and a false-bottom drawer held a few outfits for him- he could wear *any* outfit he wanted. And he could listen to music- Jonathan had brought him a tape deck and shown him his music collection. At first, the loud noises scared Will, but eventually he came around to liking them. He liked the music, it was nice and pretty and he liked to sing.

After a month or so, Joyce found some of Jonathan's old schoolbooks buried in a closet. She brought them in to start to teach Will- she said something like, "What the hell, Homeschool is still legal"- and gave him spelling books and math books and science books and everything

she could find. Will started pouring through them whenever Joyce had to be at work or Jonathan had to be at school; when he was alone in the Office, with the curtains taped shut over the windows and the dog wandering around the halls, he'd get out the schoolbooks Mom left him and start teaching himself.

He didn't talk about the Lab much, and Jonathan and Joyce didn't make him. He liked that. He only really talked about it when he had to, when he woke up from a nightmare and was sobbing and Joyce wanted to calm him down. Somehow, whenever he cried, even if it was the middle of the night, Joyce would hear him, and she would come running and hug him and reassure him and he would feel safe.

He did say a few things to them, though. One time, he mentioned that he hadn't been allowed to talk to the other boys, and the Lab probably didn't even know he knew them. He'd told that to Jonathan, when he asked how the Lab had reacted to their friendship, and his brother had gone quiet, before giving him a new book from the Library. He also told his Mom once about Solitary, when he'd had a nightmare about being thrown in the room and left there until they remembered to let him out, and she'd let him know that he'd never be left alone again, not as long as she was there.

One day, Joyce had come in and given Will a hug and asked, "Do you know what day it is?"

Will glanced at the Calendar he kept by his bed. "March 22." he said.

Joyce nodded. "Yes, it's your birthday."

Will blinked at her. "Birth... day?"

She sighed. "Of course. Of course they didn't... well, it's, um, the day you were born."

"Oh." Will said, and then his heart sank. "The day they took me?"

"Don't you worry about that." Joyce said. "You're back now, so today's a happy day. I can make you a cake, and I got you a present."

She brought out a large box of crayons, which caused Will's face to light up. She'd given him crayons before- including a box last

Christmas- but these were new *and* there were *so many* of them! He'd sat in his room and he colored all day, and basically all week. And Jonathan gave him a "mixtape" that he basically played on repeat.

The issue came a few weeks later, when he was coloring a little too hard and broke one of the red crayons. He'd frozen in terror when he heard the snap, and before he knew it he started crying. Jonathan had come in, then; he was back from school, but Joyce was still at work. Will had tried to hide the crayon, but Jonathan had seen in and said, "Oh, oh it's okay, bud. We can fix it, don't worry."

Will blinked up at him, her tears pausing for a second. "F-fix it?"

"Yeah. We can try to tape this up, and if it doesn't work, we can get a new one."

"Not mad?"

"No, of course not, and Mom won't be upset either." Jonathan said. "Did... did *they* get mad at you when you broke your stuff?"

Will glanced down at his unfinished drawing, still crying a little, and nodded. He remembered the one time he had crayons in the Lab, and he'd broken one and they took it away and never gave it back. Jonathan just hugged him, then, and told him that they'd never be mad when he made a mistake, and they were just happy he was there, that he was finally home.

And he was home. He was going to stay home. He loved his Mom, and he loved his brother, and...

*I just wish*, Will thought as he stared at the Calendar again, *I wish that the Others could be here, too.*

He hadn't heard anything from them in a year. He hoped they were okay, but he didn't know. He didn't *know* anything about them, and he missed them. He didn't like to talk about them, cause then he'd have to think about Lucas and Dustin on their own, running from the Lab and trying to survive, and of *Mike*, wherever he was, if he was even alive, and...

Will heard a thud against the window.

He paused, staring in the direction and freezing over in fear. Was someone outside the window?

He slowly stood up and approached the curtains, hearing something that sounded like a quiet shriek outside. It didn't *sound* human, so that probably made it safe?

He pushed aside the curtains- easier said than done, as they'd been taped together in the middle so he had to push all of the fabric off to the side- and peered down.

He stared for a second, then pushed the window open, and reached down to grab the thing in the dirt.

What the *hell* was this thing?



## 10. Soon

### CHAPTER TEN

*Soon*

Will opened an empty drawer, dropping the thing inside.

It was small and slimy, and made a weird screeching sound whenever the light hit it. Will peered down at the animal, wonder in his eyes. It was kinda cute, honestly, though he still wasn't sure what it was. He turned to shut the window again, and then went back to the animal, which had curled in the corner of the drawer.

Did it need food? He had some spare food shoved in one of the false-bottom drawers; he knew he didn't *need* to hide some, but it was a hard habit to break.

He grabbed a small bit of a sandwich and tossed it towards the animal, smiling when it approached and started to eat. He watched it, trying to discern a color. It was kind of a brown-yellow, or maybe a green-gray, it was kind of hard to tell in the dark lighting. It looked mostly gray, he thought.

*Gray.*

He could call it that. That would work.

Nancy woke up the next morning with a shitty hangover.

She awoke with a huge headache, and barely a memory of the party. She sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes, and figured she should get ready for school. She'd need a shower, and *God her head hurt*, and she thought water was good for that, and *she wanted to throw up* and...

Wait a minute.

She shot up in bed- something she regretted as soon as her headache hit again- and turned to her clock. Shit. *Shit. SHIT.*

It was already morning, and she'd completely forgotten Mike.

She started thinking. It was still early, so if she skipped the shower, she could run to the store, get a bag of candy- they would be discounted now that Halloween was over- and get to the Treehouse before School started. She might miss First Period, but she could apologize to Steve when she actually got to class. Shit, she'd have to come up with some kind of excuse later... it didn't matter. Mike was more important; if the poor kid wasn't pissed at her, he might have gone looking for her... *shit*, she hoped not. That would just be the icing on the cake of her shitty life.

Hopper glanced back in the car, looking at the two girls in the backseat. Neither of them were talking or looking at each other, instead choosing to stare out the window.

"So, how was Halloween?" he asked.

"Fine." Max said.

"Alright." El said.

"Okay," Hopper sighed, "So what the hell happened?"

The girls were silent for a second, before Max said, "Just... didn't sleep well."

"Nightmares?"

Max sighed and nodded.

"How..." El asked quietly, "How do you get them to stop?"

"What?"

"Nightmares. How do you get them to stop?"

Hopper paused, staring at the road. “Well, I’m not an expert or anything, but when I had bad dreams as a kid, I just learned to turn around and tell the creepy shit to go away.”

“Go away.” El sighed.

“Are... are you two sure you’re okay today?” Hopper asked again.

“Peachy.” Max said.

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

“Mike!” Nancy pounded on the door, groaning. “Mike, open the goddamn door!”

It remained bolted, she shouldn’t have expected otherwise. Even if he was there, he was probably super pissed.

“Look, I’m sorry I missed last night, the party got real out of hand... I got you a bag of candy, you can have as much as you want, and I can stay over tonight instead?”

No response.

“Well... I guess if you don’t want these Eggos in whipped cream, I can just toss them into the sewers for the Sewer Rats...” Nancy said, leaning against the door and pulling a box holding said food out of her bag, shaking it a little. “Which, you know, we’ve got those.”

After a second, she heard the bolt slide, and heaved a sigh of relief.

She walked in, dropping her bag and placing the Eggos and Candy on the table, before glancing around and not seeing any kind of movement. Ah, so, Mike was still pouting upstairs. Made sense. Normally, she liked to leave him alone when he wanted to be, but she really felt like seeing him while apologizing, so she went to the ladder and called, “Coming up!”

She made it to the second story, her face falling as she saw what was up there. Mike was curled up on his blankets, facing the wall, and his

books were scattered across the floor, messed up from their normally-ordered piles. And a strip of fabric was lying against the wall, as if it had been thrown. She knew what that blindfold meant; Mike only made it for one reason.

She slowly approached the kid, and sat next to him, waiting for him to say something. He didn't.

"Look, I'm sorry," she repeated. "Party went on pretty long and..." Well, she didn't want to say she *forgot* about him, that would just make him feel worse. But she wasn't entirely sure he would understand what *I got drunk* would mean. "Well, I lost track of time. And Steve took me home and..."

Mike flinched; well, that was movement, even though she wasn't sure why he did it. "Well, I got you candy and stuff. Were you alright last night? No raccoons break in again?"

He still didn't respond.

She glanced across the wall at the blindfold. "You talk to her again?"

She didn't need to say who. They both knew who she was talking about. After a second, Mike finally spoke, very quietly. "She says she needs me."

Nancy sighed. "Look, I know she thinks that, but the Lab's still there, and they're still watching us. Anyone who knows where you are is in danger. Trust me, you're the *last* thing she needs right now."

There was silence for a little, and Nancy wondered if she could have worded that better. She added, "Listen, that Lab won't last very long. Someone's here to investigate Barb's disappearance, sooner or later it'll get back to the Lab and to... to the people responsible. Once they're gone, you can come out. You'll see her soon, don't worry."

There was more silence, and then she heard, "Friends don't lie."

She blinked. "What?"

In a flash, Mike whipped around, a cold fury burning in his eyes, directed right at her. "Friends. Don't. *Lie!*"

“Mike...” Nancy said, slowly standing up, as Mike jumped to his feet, too.

“You’ve said ‘soon’ before.” he said. “There was a ‘soon’ on Day twenty, and on Day fifty-eight, Day one-hundred thirty, Day two-hundred fifteen-”

“What the hell, Mike, are you counting the days?” Nancy interrupted.

“When is *Soon*?” Mike yelled.

“I don’t *know*!”

“On Day Six-hundred?” he was getting louder and louder, and angrier and angrier.

“Mike!”

“On Day Seven-hundred?”

“I don’t *know*, Mike, stop!”

“Day Eight-hundred?”

“I *don’t know*!”

“*When can I see her?*”

“I *don’t know*, Mike!”

“I *NEED TO SEE HER!*”

Mike screamed, and suddenly all of his books and blankets shot up into the air, held for a second, then came crashing down. Nancy could have sworn the treehouse shook beneath her, as she toppled to the ground, flinching and aching from the landing. She stayed on the ground for a second, trying to re-steady herself. She could hear Mike breathing hard, and let out a small gasp for air. Was... was he crying?

She slowly stood back up, but before she could say anything to Mike, he talked first. “Get out.”

“M-Mike-”

“Get. Out.”

Nancy slowly turned, to see that Mike was staring at the ground, refusing to even look at her.

“I’ll be back after school.” Nancy said quietly. If he didn’t want her to be there, fine. She’d make up with him when he wasn’t as emotional. “Stay safe.”

He didn’t say any more, so she walked past him and out of the room, going down the ladder slowly in case he changed his mind and wanted her there.

He didn’t.

## 11. Gray

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gray

Mike was alone in the treehouse.

He was always alone, but this felt worse. He felt so *bad*, like something was pressing against his chest even as he sat and tried to do anything else. He tried eating the Eggos that Nancy brought him, tried reading some more, tried journaling a little, but he hated writing out his feelings and he hated thinking about that morning and, damn it, he hated being *so lonely*.

He was fiddling with the blindfold now, wondering if he should... no, no, whoever he tried to look for would just make him upset. El would be at school, and so would Nancy, and the Boys... he sighed. He'd found the other boys in the Mind Place before, but it just upset him. Last time he saw Lucas, he looked cold and sad, and Dustin just looked *tired*, and somehow every time he looked for Twelve, he was asleep. At least Twelve looked healthy- he wasn't sure how, as Twelve was usually the most sickly one of them, but he was glad for him nonetheless.

And, well, looking for anyone but El just made him feel even more alone, because El was the only one who tried to call him. At least from what he knew- the boys could be trying, but he never saw that. El, however, called him every night. He just wanted to tell her that he was okay, that he was alive, that he *missed her so much*.

He knew what he wanted to do now.

He slowly stood, throwing his blindfold to the ground. He wouldn't need it now. He wasn't going to see her in the Mind Place, not this time.

Mike slowly descended from the ladder, and then from the treehouse

altogether.

School couldn't be that hard to find.

Hopper probably should have stayed at the Station, but he stopped by Joyce Byers' house instead.

Luckily, she'd just returned from a break at work, so the two of them sat in the kitchen and shared a smoke, like they had as teenagers in High School. "Will doesn't like when I smoke," Joyce said quietly, as she passed him the cigarette back, "I think it freaks him out."

"How is he?" Hopper asked, glancing towards his door.

"He's fine, still asleep right now." Joyce said. "He probably should have gotten up a while ago, but I think he's just tired. He seemed a bit off last night. I told him to call the store if he needs anything while I'm gone, but he doesn't like using the phone."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Hopper said.

"How're El and Max?"

Hopper paused, before saying, "Fine."

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "Hop. What happened?"

"Max's episodes are getting more frequent." Hopper said quietly. "Owens says that it's some 'anniversary effect' bullshit, but... I don't know, she seemed to be getting better until just a few weeks ago. I'm not sure the Lab even gives a damn."

"Of course they don't, they didn't care if she *lived* at all." Joyce sighed, a bitter edge to her voice. "Why would they care about her health?"

Hopper looked at her curiously; she seemed to be thinking about something, something she wasn't saying. "Are you okay?"

Joyce paused. "I... I want Will to be able to go outside. I want him to



be able to go to friends' houses and see the sun and bike over to the Library to get whatever books he wants. But if he steps a foot out of the house, there's a risk that those bastards will find him again. I'm not losing him again, Hop, I *can't* lose him again."

"You won't, Joyce, he's not going anywhere."

"How can I be *sure*, Hop?" Joyce sighed. "You might *think* you know the Lab, but I've been there, and I've been fighting it for thirteen years. They won't just give up on him unless we make them."

"Unless we 'make them'?" Hopper asked, and Joyce glanced away. "Joyce, what do you think we could *do*? We can't do shit to them."

"Maybe *we* can't." Joyce said. "But, well, if people found out what they were doing, and they get shut down, they'll leave."

"You want to, what, tell the press everything that happened last year?"

"I'm not an idiot, Hop, I know that'd be a bad idea. Nobody would believe us, and my only evidence is my son that the'll drag away the second they see him. They told everyone that the boys are Russian Spies, too, so it's not like Will would be the most convincing person for anyone. We'd need some kind of... a confession, or something, on tape or video, and then we just need to leak it to someone brave or stupid enough to release it, so it can't get traced back to us."

"You've certainly thought this through."

"Yeah, well, I've had a long year." Joyce sighed. "I've seen firsthand what they did to him, Hop. They only gave him food when they bothered to remember he existed, he still has nightmares about everything that happened... and how much are they *actually* helping Max?"

They hadn't. They just sat her in a chair and ran tests and told him to pretend nothing was wrong. That's all they'd done for a year, and she was getting worse.

Before he could say anything more, he heard a muffled call from another room. "Mom?"

Joyce jumped to her feet, rushing off to Will's room. Hopper paused before following, staying just outside the door as Joyce talked. "Hey, Will. How'd you sleep?"

Will must have made some kind of motion, because Joyce continued. "Um, Hopper is here, can he come in?" After a pause, she called, "Hop, you can come in!"

Hopper opened the door, seeing Will curled up under a large blanket in his bed. "I'm going back to work soon, do you need anything?" Joyce asked.

Will said, "I found a thing!"

"Oh?" Joyce asked. "What?"

Will got up, running to one of the drawers and opening it. His face lit up, and he reached in and pulled out...

Oh, *God*.

Joyce and Hopper both stared at the squirming, crawling thing in Will's hands. "No legs last night." the boy said, smiling a little and gesturing to the four, small legs. "He grew them! His name's Gray. Is he a frog?"

"Good Lord." Hopper said under his breath.

That was when the thing screeched, and both adults started staring at it harder. They both instantly recognized that screech.

"Sweetie," Joyce said, very calmly, "Where did you find that?"

"Crawled in." Will shrugged, noticing their odd looks. "What?"

"Kid," Hopper said, "That... that thing is most definitely from the Upside-Down."

Will completely froze, staring at them in complete shock as the thing-Gray?- started to screech again.

"Will, put it down, and we'll take care of it." Joyce said, but he still

didn't move. "You're not in trouble, sweetheart, we just..."

Hopper noticed Will's nosebleed first, as the boy looked down at the creature. After an instant, he screamed, and dropped Gray to the floor, watching as the thing started to run. It managed to squeeze out the door before Hopper could even move- *God*, that thing moved fast. Hopper went after it, as Joyce ran to her son, but the thing was gone by the time he reached the Hallway.

He turned back, "What the *hell*?"

Joyce was hugging Will, who was shaking and crying. Suddenly, something hit Hopper.

If that thing was from the Upside-Down- if that Gate was still open- then there was a good chance that Max's visions were real. And that meant that the *thing* would go straight for her.

"I'm going after it," was all he said, before he rushed out.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I hope y'all enjoyed your 11 Chapters of Setup, because tomorrow the Angst Train begins and it's a non-stop trip! You guys are gonna love the next chapter... :)

## 12. She's Not There

### Notes for the Chapter:

So, uh, this chapter's named after a line from "Superboy and the Invisible Girl", even though that's DEFINITELY not an 80's song, because when I got to writing this chapter I had legit no idea how I was gonna do this part, and then that song came on while my iTunes was on shuffle, and it kinda inspired the changes made to canon in this chapter involving Max. I am actually REALLY proud of this chapter, I really hope it turned out good!

Welcome to the Beginning of the Angst, guys. We're just getting started XD

### CHAPTER TWELVE

#### *She's Not There*

The school bell rung, and El shouldered her bag and waited for Max.

Max always took a long time to get out of classes, which was a new development. Before all the incidents last year, she'd been practically bursting to get out of the building and go to the Arcade. Now, though, she seemed reluctant to go outside, especially alone. It worried El, to be honest. A lot of stuff was worrying El.

She scanned the crowd of kids. None of them looked at her, but she was used to that. They really only looked at her when she was with Max because, even after a year, coming back to life made a person a bit popular. Max hated it, El could tell, but she never said anything, and El was starting to get worried that Max wasn't saying a lot of things.

The kids kept pushing past, all eager to get out of school, to get as far away from the building as they could. El really couldn't wait to do

that, too: every hallway seemed to remind her of that day almost a year ago, of the bodies hitting the floor, of shards of light beside her, of Mike crumpling to the ground, of Mike disappearing into blackness, of the window shattering, of...

Of...

That couldn't be right. El shook her head to clear it, and stared ahead. No, *no*, that *was* right. Among the crowd of rushing students, she could see a kid turning the hallway, farther into the building, closer to the AV Room. She didn't see his face, but she caught the back of his head, and she recognized the dark black hair- a bit longer than she'd seen it last, but she *knew* who it was.

"Lucas?" she whispered at first, then yelled, "Lucas!" and started to run.

She pushed through the crowd, not caring how many people were yelling at her now, and turned the corner. He wasn't there, but she heard footsteps down the hall. She had to follow, she had to see him. If he was actually there, if he wasn't just her imagination, she could actually *see* him...

Mike hid behind a wall, watching as kids filed out. He'd completely forgotten how many children were at the assembly last year, and there somehow seemed to be *more*. He watched carefully, looking for El's curls among the group, but she wasn't there. The crowd moved on, running off to wherever they wanted to go, but she wasn't among them. He couldn't have missed her, he'd spent all the last year just *thinking* about her, there was no way he wouldn't be able to spot her. He took a deep breath and made a run for it, rushing to the school and into the building, flinching as the door slammed behind him.

He looked around the hallway, his heart beating faster as he remembered everything that had happened in this very building. But, no, he couldn't think about that now. He had to find El. He *had to see El*.

He picked a hallway at random and rushed down.

El made it to the AV Room, and her eyes fell on the door. It was cracked open, just enough so that it wouldn't shut on whoever was inside. And someone *was* inside: she heard the radio dials, and a low buzz.

Max and Mr. Clarke were the only ones who used the room, aside from her. Maybe Max was in there, maybe Mr. Clarke was running late, maybe...

"Son of a bitch!" came a light voice from inside. "Son of a *bitch*!"

Her breath caught in her throat, as she stared at the door, completely freezing over. She recognized that voice. *She recognized that voice!*

"You're doing it wrong." came another voice that she instantly recognized, and suddenly she could barely breathe.

"The radio's just being a little shit!"

"*You're* being a little shit!"

"This doesn't work the same as the Library Radio, okay? It's bullshit!"

She burst into a run, her head buzzing, her mind racing. She threw open the door, staring ahead into the dark room and stopping in her tracks.

Ahead, two boys stopped fiddling with the AV Radio for a moment, and Lucas and Dustin's heads shot up, staring at her in shock.

For almost a minute, they just stared at each other, everything going completely silent. El felt like her mind was stalling; she could barely think or *breathe*, she could just stare at the two boys that she thought she'd never see again. They stared back, looking guilty and sad and surprised and excited and everything all at once.

The silence was broken by a call from far away, down several halls. "*El!*" It was Max's voice, sounding concerned and upset.

El turned, just so slightly, to look towards the sound, and in a flash,

the boys moved. Lucas threw out his hands, and suddenly everything went dark. El let out a shout, stepping backwards, and heard footsteps rush past her. They were running, they were running away from her. “No!” she yelled, and started following the sound of the boys’ feet, running with her arms out in case she should run into something. The light came back when she almost hit the wall, and she kept running, turning the hall and following the boys as fast as she could.

“Get back here! Stop! *Stop!*”

“*Stop!*”

Mike’s head shot towards the right, as her voice rang in her ears. It wasn’t echoey, it wasn’t from far away, it was *there*, and it was close.

He started running after the voice, just to see her, just to find out what was going on.

He was going to *see her*.

El heard a door slam as she turned the corner, and rushed towards the doors that led to the gym. They’d run in there, and she just had to follow them, just had to get them to stop for a moment.

She rushed in the gym, and stopped in the middle of the room. She couldn’t see the boys anywhere, she had no idea where they might have gone...

*Damn it*, the window was open. Did they climb out the window? Jesus, how much did they want to avoid her?

She started to head towards the window when the gym doors opened again. El whipped around to see Max burst in, her bag over her shoulder and a stormy look on her face.

“What the *hell* are you doing?”

El glanced towards the window, then back to Max. “Max, they’re here, Lucas and Dustin, I saw them-”

“El, I was looking for you, and you weren’t *there!*” Max yelled, and suddenly El picked up on the anger in her voice. “You were gone and I was alone and *where the hell were you?*”

“Max, Lucas and Dustin were *here*,” El said. “I saw them, they were-”

“No, no they weren’t!”

El jumped, and then froze.

Max was screaming now, her voice too loud and a formerly hidden anger bubbling over. “They weren’t here, El! They never are!”

“They were here, Max-”

“*I’m here, El!*” Max yelled. “I’m here and you left me behind!”

Mike heard the yelling. He came to the gym door and peered into the window, freezing when he saw El. She looked distressed, which was obviously not good, but the second he saw her, his spirits lifted and he felt a small smile rise on his face. She was there, and he could see her right in front of him, and if she just turned around...

His smile dropped a second later when he saw the girl next to her. He recognized her, after a second, as Max, the girl they’d been trying to find all last year. But she didn’t look as sick as she had when he’d found her last, she looked angry and hurt and was yelling at El... why would she yell at El? Why would anybody yell at El?

He could hear her voice, and he caught on after a second.

“I’m here and you left me behind!” she yelled.

“I didn’t leave you!” El said, and his heart skipped a beat when he heard her voice.

“Yes, you did, El! You left me last night, and you left me today!



They're not here, and I need you to be here with me!"

"They're actually here, Max, I saw them!"

"You *didn't*!" Max screamed. "Lucas and Dustin left, El, and they're not coming back! *Mike* left, and he's *not coming back*!"

There was a full second that seemed to last forever. Though Mike didn't notice, Max's face dropped there, instant regret showing on her face. El let out a choked sob, stepping backwards and shaking. And Mike froze over, terror and sadness ripping through him.

*He's not coming back.*

He knew that El couldn't see him. He knew that he had to hide, he had to stay safe, he had to keep her safe, but he was *still there*. He would come back for her, he *had* come back for her.

After the second passed, his sadness turned to anger. How *could* Max say that? He'd saved her, and now she was saying he wasn't coming back. How *dare* she say something like that, to *El*? How could she do that to El and to *him*?

Before he could think, he glared down at Max's feet, and tipped his head to the side.

And Max fell.

She hit the ground, and Mike took a deep breath, looking ahead. El had rushed forwards, grabbing Max's shoulders and shaking her. "Max? Max, are you alright?" she was yelling. "Are you *okay*?"

Mike stepped backwards, his heart sinking. Max had just said horrible things about him, and El was helping her. Couldn't she realize that Mike was there, that he was just behind the door? Why would she help someone who'd just said those things about him? Did she believe her? Did she actually think that he wouldn't come back?

He took another long look at El, trying to talk to the girl on the floor, and then ran.

Max hit the ground, and everything flashed black.

It was blue, and then white, and then blue, and then white. She sat up, shaking, and El reached forwards and grabbed her. “Max?” she asked. “Max, are you-”

Then El was gone, and the world was dark.

Max shakily backed up, straining to try and hear El’s voice, but she heard nothing. She struggled to her feet as the little light started to flash, the darkness still around her.

Wait, no, she heard something, a low rumble. Something big, and something loud.

She slowly turned, and out of the locker room door burst a cloud of darkness. Her eyes widened, her heart started beating faster, and she turned to flee.

She ran as fast as she could, running from hall to hall, but it was always right behind her. The cloud of darkness kept following, and it didn’t slow or stop.

She burst outside, rushing onto the field, trying not to look at the dark sky flashing red, trying to just get out...

No.

*No.*

She wasn’t going to run anymore. She always ran, but not now. She wanted these Episodes to stop. She wanted them to go away, she wanted to be normal again and not be afraid to be alone.

She slowly turned towards the School, seeing the Shadow Monster rise above it, its eyeless face turning towards her, legs reaching forwards.

“Go away.” Max said, as calmly as she could, trying not to look at the Monster coming forwards, stepping closer, reaching towards her.

“Go away.” she said again, trying to stop crying, trying to stay calm,

trying to show no fear.

She started to scream as the Monster didn't stop. "*Go away! Go away! GO AWAY!*"

A leg reached forwards, turning into a cloud of dust and smoke, and it surrounded her.

She couldn't see anything, and all she could feel was dark material forcing itself down her throat, into her ears, into every hole in her face. She couldn't breathe or blink or hear or smell or *think*, she just felt herself choking and sobbing and freezing in place, and it was *inside* her, it was filling her, it was consuming her.

She was disappearing.

## 13. It Got Me

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is yet another chapter I'm super proud of. Hope y'all like it! :D

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### *It Got Me*

Nancy stopped by the Police Station on her way home, peering in and glancing around. Nobody seemed particularly busy, so she walked up to Flo and asked, "Uh, is Hopper here?"

"Chief took off to pick up his kids." Flo said. "You can leave a message and I can get it back to him."

"I-I just wanted to see how Max and El are doing, but I guess I can just talk to him later." Nancy shrugged. She wasn't sure *why* she came in, she just felt like shit from her fights that day, first with Mike and then with Steve- apparently she had said some really shitty stuff to him while drunk and... maybe they just broke up? She wasn't exactly sure.

"Sucks he can't be here." Flo said. "He woulda liked this new case, someone saw a kid with superpowers."

*No.*

"Someone saw *what*?" Nancy said, a little too quickly.

Flo sighed. "Powell, what did the woman say about the psychic boy?"

Officer Powell looked up from his desk and said, "Yeah, some boy apparently asked some woman how to get to school, and when she asked about his parents, he stared at the swingset until the swings broke off."

"Murray's not gonna shut up about this." Callahan sighed, tossing a file towards the other Officer.

Nancy stared at them for a second, then shook her head. "I... I have to go."

She took off at a run.

Hopper rushed into the school, calling, "Max! El!"

He ran between empty halls, and they weren't there. They were supposed to have gone to the Station, but they weren't there, and they weren't anywhere on the path between the two places. He kept calling while going through the halls, trying to find them before something else did.

Finally, he heard a muffled call of, "Dad? Dad!"

He followed the voice, reaching a door that led outside. He swung it open, and saw the girls outside, in the middle of the field.

El was standing in front of Max, a panicked look in her eyes, turning to Hopper with relief. Max was completely still, her face lifted towards the sky and eyes shut. As Hopper ran forwards, he saw, to his horror, that she was barely breathing.

"I don't know what happened!" El said, and Hopper noticed that she was crying. "We were fighting, and she fell, and then I think she had an Episode and now she won't *move*!"

"Max, Max, come on, wake up!" Hopper said, grabbing her shoulders, trying to make her move. "Max, it's Hopper, I'm here, you gotta wake up, Max!"

He kept calling, trying to keep panic from rising in his voice, which El's now very audible crying wasn't helping.

"Max! Max! *Max*!"

Suddenly, Max's head threw itself forwards, and she took in a gasp of

air as her eyes flew open. She stared at the two of them in terror for a second, then burst into tears.

Max calmed down once they got to the car, and then just remained silent the entire ride home. Hopper had the two girls sit at the table, and asked El what had happened.

“Like I said, we were arguing.” El said. “In the gym. I thought I saw... it doesn’t matter, she fell down and then just *ran*, and I found her in the field.”

Hopper turned to Max, who was curled up in her chair, staring blankly at the wall.

“What happened, Max?” Hopper asked.

“I don’t remember.” she said quietly.

“Okay, Max, I need you to try.” he said.

Max paused, taking another deep breath, and then said, “I... I was on the field, and... and then it all went black, and then you and El were there.”

Hopper gave her a look. “Max, one bonus of being a Police Officer for as long as I have is you start to notice things. Like when somebody’s lying.”

“I’m not lying.” Max said.

“Max.”

Max sighed, glancing over at El, who was trying to keep from crying.

“Max,” Hopper continued, “These episodes you keep having, I think Owens is wrong. I think there’s something going on, I don’t think these are flashbacks, but you have to tell us what’s happening so we can fix it, okay?”

Max’s voice cracked as she said, “It got me.”

“What?”

She continued, tears starting. “I saw it. The Shadow Monster.”

“The Shadow Monster?” El asked.

“It’s got four legs, that split into more.” Max described, shutting her eyes. “And a face but no eyes. It’s huge, bigger than the school.”

“What is it?” Hopper asked.

“I don’t know.” her voice cracked again, the volume barely above a whisper. “It’s... it’s like a feeling. It... it came for me, and I tried, I tried to make it go away, but it *got me*.”

“What does that mean?” El asked, staring at her best friend in terror. “Max, what does that mean?”

“I felt it...” Max said, now crying. “I felt it *everywhere*. I *still feel it*, I just want it to leave me *alone*!”

She burst into sobs, and El rushed forwards, throwing her arms around her. Max hugged El back, clutching to her and sobbing, and El turned to her Dad, giving him a look that asked what they should do.

Hopper had no answer.

Mike made it back to the treehouse, and saw the door was already open.

Great. As if he didn’t have enough to deal with today.

He climbed up the ladder, and saw Nancy sitting at the table. She turned to him, glaring with the intensity of a thousand suns. He shot the look back, then moved to walk past her; she jumped up and grabbed his arm, holding him in place.

“‘Friends Don’t Lie’, isn’t that your bullshit saying?” she said.

Mike jerked back, breaking away from her, and rushing to the ladder.

“Hey! Hey! Get back here!” Nancy shouted.

Mike didn’t respond, simply going up to the second floor and walking towards his blankets, kicking a book across the floor. He heard Nancy come up after him, and bit back a groan. He was too exhausted for this, but she clearly didn’t care.

“Where’d you go, Mike?” Nancy asked. “Where’d you run off to? You go to school? You actually manage to make it there?”

Mike didn’t respond, kicking his blanket pile instead of sitting down, trying to ignore her.

“Did you go see El?”

Mike paused, biting his lip and staring at the wall, and he finally said, “She didn’t see me.”

Of course she didn’t. He’d been stupid to think she would.

“Yeah, well, someone *did* and they called the cops. I’m gonna have to convince Hopper to drop the case, you little shit! Did *anyone* else see you?”

“Nobody saw me!” Mike said, whipping around and shooting her a glare. “Nobody *ever sees me!*”

“You put us in danger!” Nancy screamed. “Why don’t you *get that?* If this gets back to the Lab-”

“You *promised* I’d go!” Mike screamed back, his anger flaring up and energizing him. “I want to go! And I *never leave!* I’m *stuck here!* Nothing ever happens!”

“Nothing happens and you stay *safe!*” Nancy shouted, banging her hand on the wall. Mike flinched and immediately regretted that; he couldn’t show weakness. Not now, not again.

“You *lie!*” Mike shouted.



"I do what I have to do!" Nancy yelled. "So that you stay safe! Everything I do, I do so that you don't get dragged back to being a goddamn science experiment! And all *you* have to do is stay here and don't cause trouble! Why is that so damn difficult for you?" She groaned, then said, "You know what? You're grounded. I'm grounding you. You know what that means? No Eggos, no Candy, and you can have *these* back in a week!"

She reached down, grabbing one of his books off the floor- a written version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*- and tossing it down the hole to the second floor. He felt panic rise in his chest- no, *no*, he needed those!

She grabbed another one- *The Princess Bride*- and suddenly her arm couldn't move. She turned, glaring at Mike, who was staring at the book, his nose bleeding.

"Knock it off!" she yelled.

He shook his head, still staring at the book.

"Two weeks, then." she said, trying to raise her arm some more. Mike wouldn't let her. "A Month! Drop it, you little shit!"

"No." Mike said.

"Well, when you put it like that," Nancy said, moving her hand to the books' binding instead of the side, and pulling hard. Before Mike could even do anything, the book had ripped in half.

"No!" Mike shouted, rushing past her and grabbing the pages from the floor- they were all falling through the air and into the floorboards, with the books' torn cover crashing beside him. The book was destroyed.

"You have got to understand," Nancy said, stepping back a little, "That there are consequences to your actions."

"You!" Mike whipped towards her, his eyes burning. "*You are like Papa!*"

"Really?" Nancy asked, her voice dropping from a shout to a low

threat. "I'm like that son of a bitch? Alright, you wanna go back to the Lab? It's right down the street, I can drive you there."

"I *hate* you!" Mike yelled, the pages of his precious book slipping through his fingers, some dropping through the boards and onto the next story. He'd never be able to gather them all together again.

"Yeah, well, I'm not too fond of you!" Nancy said. "Wanna know why? Cause you're a *brat*! Do you know *that* word? Why don't you look that up, it's *b-r-a-t*!"

She grabbed the Dictionary from the floor and threw it, aiming for his feet. It never hit the ground; Mike held it still in the air with his powers, and then shot it back at her, hitting her in the face. She let out a startled shriek, then shouted, "What the *hell* is *wrong* with you?"

Mike threw his arms out, and Nancy was pushed backwards. "Hey! Stop it!"

He pushed again, and Nancy fell down the hole to the second floor, landing with a gasp. Mike used his powers to rip a built-in shelf from the wall, dropping it above the hole, blocking the entrance.

"Mike! Move this piece of shit!" Nancy screamed.

Mike retreated to his blankets, curling up and trying not to listen to her shouts. He was sobbing, now, not caring anymore about holding it all in. He was shaking and crying and he didn't want to *feel* anymore.

"You wanna go outside?" Nancy shouted. "You wanna get into the world? You gotta grow up! Grow the *hell* up!"

Mike couldn't take it anymore. He was *done*, with Nancy, with El, with the Others, with the Lab, with *everything*.

He let out a shriek, of frustration, of anger, of terror, of *pain*, and everything exploded.

The books shot into the air, some of them also ripping, some of them just thudding against the walls. Another shelf toppled, a jar shattering onto the ground. Something happened downstairs, too; he

thought the table toppled, and more glass shattered, probably from the bottles or windows.

Nancy didn't say anything more, or maybe she did and he just didn't care anymore. He was sobbing again, curling up against the corner and trying to just make it all *stop*.

In the woods, the two boys looked at each other.

They were silent for a second, then Dustin said, "That was close."

Lucas took a breath, then said, "We should've stopped for her."

Dustin gave him a look, then told him the same thing they had to say to each other every time they saw a friend. "It's too dangerous. They're being watched."

Lucas nodded slowly, then said, "We shouldn't have gone into school. It was stupid to think we could use the radio to talk to him."

They looked to each other, then Dustin said, "We could try again?"

"No. If he wanted to find us, he could." He didn't want to say that maybe he *couldn't* find them, maybe he would *never* find them, because maybe he hadn't come back. They both knew that was a possibility, but they'd be damned if they admitted it.

"Let's get back to the plan?" Dustin suggested, glancing away and staring at the leaves.

"Yes." Lucas nodded, and he turned his head towards the direction he knew Hawkins Lab to be in. "Let's find the Monster."

## 14. Cold

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

#### *Cold*

Hopper called the school the next morning, saying that El and Max were sick. Really, they were, but it wasn't with the flu.

El and Max didn't even sleep in their room that night; they slept in the living room, both wrapped in a blanket, though Max had kicked it off of her in the middle of the night. Hopper himself could barely sleep, waking up every time the house creaked or the wind changed.

The next morning, he managed to find some Eggos left in the kitchen and made breakfast for the girls, who woke up a short time later and staggered over. Neither ate, though: El just picked at her waffle, glancing between her Dad and her best friend, and Max didn't even do that, instead opting to sit in her chair and stare at the wall.

"No school today." Hopper said. "You two are gonna stay here and relax, and I'm gonna try and find out what's going on."

"Are you gonna leave?" El asked.

Hopper paused. "Not if you guys need me here."

After a second, Max said, "You can go."

"What?" both Hopper and El said.

"You can go." Max said. "If you can stop this thing, we can handle ourselves for a few hours."

"I might be gone a while, I don't want you to have another Episode while I'm--"

"I won't."

She said it with such pure certainty that El jumped. Hopper could only just stare, concerned.

Max simply gave him a blank look. "I won't. You can go."

She reached down, and passed him a sheet of notebook paper. She had drawn something huge on it, and it took Hopper a second to realize that it looked like the Monster she'd described last night.

Max looked up at him, a determined look in her eyes, and said, "Kill this bastard."

Joyce looked up from the drawing, staring at Hopper. "So, this thing, it's in the... the Upside-Down?"

"Yeah." Hopper nodded. "And it's what's been hunting Max."

"Good God." Joyce said, leaning back in her chair.

They were sitting in her kitchen again, but they weren't sharing a smoke.

"So," Joyce said, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to the Lab." Hopper said.

"What do you think *they're* gonna do?" Joyce asked bitterly, as she slid the drawing back onto the table.

"I don't think they're going to do anything. I think them not doing anything was the problem." He sighed, before continuing, "Joyce, not only did this *thing* manage to reach Max, but one of those slug things got into your damn house. You know what this means?"

Joyce shook her head.

"They never shut that Gate."

He supposed they never said that they *would*, but he kind of assumed that after he and Joyce had dragged Max's comatose body out, the

scientists left would shut something out. Joyce flinched and glanced towards Will's door.

Hopper sighed. "So, I'm gonna go, and tell them to close the damn thing."

"That's not gonna work." Joyce informed him. "They'll just deny anything's wrong. And after all the shit that Gate gave them, they'd close it if they could."

"So, what do you want to do?" Hopper asked.

"Get it shut down."

Hopper sighed. "Listen, I know you want that place--"

"That's not why, Hop." Joyce rolled her eyes. "We leak that dangerous stuff is going on there, they won't all leave at once. They'll have government inspections to see if they're actually doing the shit they're supposed to be doing. And they'll definitely find the Gate."

"So your plan is to get *more* government people in town?"

"The more people there, the faster they can all figure out how to close it." Joyce said. "And once that's done, they'll shut it all down and leave." She gave him a look. "It's not foolproof, sure, but do you have a better plan?"

Hopper sighed. "So, how do we get evidence?"

She paused. "Um, well, they're actually letting *you* into the Lab, so..."

"How would you feel about talking shit about the Lab?"

Joyce smiled, looking up and thinking. "I do that every day."

"Let's say that I bring you in cause you saw that little animal thing, or you're threatening to spill everything to the Press--"

"And then they kill me, great plan."

"Owens is trying to win me onto his side, he won't just kill you. He'll

try to convince you to shut up, and hopefully he'll say something incriminating in his explanation, something we can record." Hopper said. "Then we take the tape to... God, he's gonna be so annoying, but Murray's the best chance we've got of someone believing us."

"Where is he?"

"About a day's drive away." Hopper said, remembering the address that the conspiracy-obsessed nut gave him on a business card.

Joyce took a breath. "Will's gonna miss me."

Hopper paused. "You don't have to come to Murray's."

"No. I wanna be there when we destroy this place." Joyce shook her head. "I'll explain to Will, and Jonathan can watch him, just... just give me a second. I'll call into work and tell them I'm sick, then I'll explain to my son... and then we'll get started."

El peered up from her book, trying to get a look at Max. Her best friend was sitting on her cot, staring up at the ceiling. She'd tied her hair up into a bun, and that itself was a huge worry- Max wouldn't let anyone do *anything* to her hair. It was always down, and never decorated. She was wearing light clothes too- a tank top and shorts, which wasn't exactly what anybody in an Indiana Winter would want to wear at any point.

"You... doing okay?" El asked carefully. She still wasn't sure if they'd technically recovered from their argument, but Max was talking to her, at least.

Max sighed. "I'm pretty hot."

El walked over, feeling her forehead. *Yikes*, it did feel like a fever. "I'm not sure what to do for that." she admitted. "Maybe a bath? Does that sound good?"

"Whatever."

El bit her lip and went to start the bath, waiting until the tub was full

to go back, to find that Max was still sitting in the exact same place.

“Uh, I got it.” El said. Max nodded at her and walked out, barely even looking at her as she did. El bit her lip and considered turning around, but... no, Max didn’t seem to want to talk to her at the moment. She didn’t blame her, Max must’ve been terrified yesterday when she went to their meeting place and she wasn’t there, and... she wasn’t entirely sure what had happened to make Max fall, but maybe if they hadn’t been fighting, she wouldn’t have gotten hurt.

El sat back on her bed and flipped into her book again- not that she could pay much attention to *The Purgatorio* now- but only made it a few more sentences before Max came in again.

“It’s too hot.” she said simply.

El blinked at her. “What?”

“The Bath.” Max glanced down at the ground. “It’s too hot.”

“Oh, shit, sorry.” El said, standing up. “I probably turned the hot water knob too much, lemme get that.”

She walked back into the bath, reaching in and touching the water. Hmm, it was more lukewarm than hot. She turned towards the door, seeing Max standing there, waiting. “Um,” she said, “I mean, it’s not *that* hot. I think hot baths are supposed to be better for you-”

“No.” Max said sharply, and El looked up at her in surprise. “He likes it cold.”

El *couldn’t* have heard that right. “Sorry, what?”

Max gave her a blank look, which was somehow worse than a scared one. “He likes it cold.”

“Will, sweetheart, I need you to listen for a second.”

Will looked up from his bed, staring up at his Mom. He was still shaken from the day before, and hadn’t spoken much.



“I have to go for just a few days- don’t get worried!” Joyce said, coming into his room and sitting on the edge of his bed, smiling at him. “I’m only going to be gone for a little while, I’ll be with Hopper, and then I’m going to be back. Jonathan will take care of you, okay?”

Will looked up at her and tried not to look too sad. She hadn’t left him for more than a few hours since he’d arrived. “Is it because of Gray?” he asked quietly.

He blamed himself for that. He hadn’t even thought that Gray might be something dangerous. He didn’t even think to use his powers when he saw it. He hadn’t had to use his powers in... well, in a year. But he should have, and then he would have seen the bright red aura that surrounded the creature, and he wouldn’t have let it into his house.

“No, no, it’s not.” Joyce said. “It’s just something that... well, that might help you be able to go outside. Wouldn’t you like that?”

He supposed he would, but he hadn’t really given it much thought. He nodded a little, and Joyce pulled him into a quick hug. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, everything will be alright.”

Will really wished he could believe her.

## 15. Vines

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### *Vines*

El opened the door, her expression of relief turning quickly to confusion. “Jonathan?”

Jonathan Byers looked down at her. “Uh, hi, El. I was just... i-is my Mom here?”

El gave him a look. “Uh, *why* would your Mom be here?”

Jonathan paused. “Um, well... can I come in?”

El nodded, and waited until he walked in to shut the door. “What’s up?”

“She wasn’t home when I got back from school,” Jonathan said, “And all Will would tell me was that she was ‘with Hopper’ and ‘going for a few days’. Do you-”

“Um...” El paused. “Well, uh, here’s the thing... you know Max?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” Jonathan nodded.

“Well, um, she kinda got... semi-possessed?” El said. “And Dad’s trying to fix it... don’t look like that, it’s not like this is an unusual thing, right?”

Jonathan stared at her. “Yes it is, El!”

“Yeah, I know, I’m kind of in a panic right now.” El said, glancing away from him. “Uh... do you wanna talk to her?”

Jonathan sighed. “I mean, why the hell not? It looks like my Mom skipped town to fight aliens and Nancy’s busy, so if I can help-”

“Great, come with me!” El said, grabbing his hand and dragging him up the stairs.

Honestly, she was desperate to have somebody help her. She was in over her head, and she didn’t want to have to deal with this alone. And she didn’t really want to call her Dad... what if he was onto something? What if he was about to figure out how to get rid of the Shadow Monster, and he decided to come home instead to help Max, and that Monster got to keep doing whatever the hell it was doing?

El knocked on her door, saying, “Hey, Max, Jonathan Byers is here! Can we come in?”

She didn’t hear a response, so she just opened the door and walked in anyway. Max was sitting on El’s bed, still wearing the tank top and a pair of shorts. She hadn’t taken the bath once it became clear El wasn’t going to cool it down, so she was just trying to keep herself cold in the room instead.

Jonathan came in, saying, “Um, hey. So... want to tell me what’s going on?”

El sighed. “Well, Max was having an Episode, and the... the Shadow Monster caught up to her, and it filled her, and-”

“And now I’m here.” Max finished, looking at Jonathan in confused. “Why are you here?”

“I... It’s not important.” Jonathan said.

“And, um, Max says that It likes the cold.” El said.

“It?”

“The... the Monster.” El flinched. “It’s... it’s inside her.”

“So,” Jonathan directed his question at Max, “You know that it likes the cold?”

Max nodded.

“How do you know that?”

Max shrugged. "I dunno, I just... do."

"Does it..." El asked quietly, "Does it talk to you?"

Max shook her head. "No, it's just like... just like I *know*. Like I always knew, but I didn't."

Jonathan sent a quick, panicked glance to El, before asking, "Do you... do you know anything else?"

Max considered. "It's... it's kinda like old memories, in the back of my head. Only they're not old, they're happening now, and they're not *my* memories." Her voice cracked, and her eyes started to redden. She glanced away from them, but Jonathan could catch her pained expression.

"Can you describe these... these memories?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't *know*!" Max said. "I don't know, I can't explain..."

"Can you try?" El put a hand on her shoulder, but Max flinched away.

"It's..." Max thought, her voice breaking more as she talked, tears starting to flow. "It's growing and spreading and... *killing*."

"What's It? The memories?" El asked.

"I don't *know*!" Max shouted. "I'm sorry, I don't *know*!"

El leaned over to hug her friend, who continued to cry. She looked at Jonathan sadly, hoping that he'd think of something. And thank God, he did.

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small box of crayons. "I was gonna give these to my brother, but..." he sighed. "I can- I can get him more. Max, what if you didn't have to explain with words?"

Max glanced at him, and then the crayon box, and then nodded.

“What *are* these?” El asked.

They were in the hallway, and holding six papers of what looked like a blue mess. Max had drawn them at amazing speed, before dropping them onto the ground.

“They look like blue-tinted rainbows.” Jonathan said. “I don’t see what this is supposed to be.”

“Hold on, give me this.” El said, grabbing his paper and placing it on the ground. She grabbed another and placed it on the bottom; the lines connected. “It’s all one big picture.” she turned to Jonathan. “She’s drawing us one big picture.”

Jonathan stared at it, then back at El. “I’m gonna call my brother and tell him I’ll be home late tonight. You get some tape.”

Will hung up the phone and sighed.

He hated talking onto it- it felt impersonal, and it was really daunting to hear somebody’s voice and not see their face. But when Jonathan and Joyce weren’t home, just in case they needed to talk to him, he’d been instructed to pick up a ringing phone and say nothing, and if he didn’t recognize the voice, to hang up.

But he did recognize the voice, and it was Jonathan, and *he* was going to be late, too. Will was gonna be alone all day.

Great. Just what he loved. Being alone.

He stayed in his room and listened to music and drew for a bit, but he eventually got tired of it and sat in silence for a bit, trying to study some more. It didn’t work; he just kept thinking and that just made him feel sad.

He continued to sit in silence until he heard a familiar screech outside the window.

He froze in fear for a second, then shook his head. No, *no*, he wasn’t going to hide from it, he didn’t want to hide from *anything* anymore.

So, he threw on a jacket, put on his shoes, and climbed out the window.

Gray's screech echoed from behind the shed, so he went out there. He flinched at the sound of grass beneath his feet, and broke into a run instead. If he couldn't have the element of surprise, he might as well get there fast.

However, nothing could prepare him for what he saw behind the shed.

He stepped back in horror and shock when he saw what was going on. There was a creature, a creature the same color as Gray, and beneath it was something that was once a rabbit, except it wasn't alive anymore. It was bloody and ripped open and Gray was *eating it*.

Slowly, Gray turned towards Will, and Will froze in horror when Gray's face opened up and he screeched again, and Will realized what it was.

*Oh, Lord, he thought, It's a Demogorgon.*

Steve sat in his car, breathing deeply and staring ahead.

He wanted to go to Nancy, wanted to get her flowers and apologize about... well, what the hell would he be sorry for? He wasn't the one who said their entire relationship was bullshit.

He slowly got out of the car. Maybe he could just go back inside and... no. Even if their relationship was over, he didn't want to part on such bad terms.

Just as he turned, about to enter the car again, he saw a flash from the side of his house.

He paused, staring at the area he'd seen movement. He thought he'd seen a shape, of some kind of person. Of a certain kid.

He slowly started approaching the side of the house, before breaking into a run. Once he turned the corner, he saw a small boy, running

away. And he recognized him.

He rushed forwards, and was glad that he happened to be faster than a thirteen-year-old, as he caught up quite quickly and tackled the boy to the ground.

“No, you don’t!” Steve yelled.

And Dustin whipped around, staring up at him in a panic.

Steve stared down at him for a second, barely able to believe that he was *there*. He hadn’t seen him since that *night* where he’d fought the Demogorgon, and he’d just told him to go with the teenagers or something worse would happen, and when he came back the boys were gone and El was sobbing and all she would say was that they’d run. And he’d waited, waited for months and left a key under the mat and a kept his window a little open, but he hadn’t come back.

He wanted to tell him how much he’d *missed* him, how he’d been terrified that he’d been hurt or killed or dragged back to the Lab, or that the Demogorgon had come back and gone after him, and how he wished he’d just told those dumb visions to screw it and stayed behind and protected them. He *should have* stayed behind.

What he said instead was, “Where the hell have you been? It’s been a whole goddamn year, you little shit!”

Dustin paused, then smiled weakly. “Hey, Steve.” he said. “I missed you, too.”

## 16. Changing Direction

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

#### *Changing Direction*

Joyce worriedly looked up from the Hotel phone, shaking her head at Hopper. “The boys aren’t answering.” she said.

“I’m sure they’re alright,” Hopper said, though he wasn’t sure at all.

“Hopper, we just left the *Lab*.” Joyce said. “What if they checked out my house after we told them I was threatening them, and they found Will, and-”

“Let me call my house.” Hopper said, holding out his hand for the phone. “If my girls are there, then the Lab at least hasn’t checked *them* out, and I can see if I can send someone to your place.”

Joyce nodded slowly, handing the phone to Hopper. He dialed, and waited.

After a second, a voice he didn’t expect answered. “Hello?”

“Jonathan?” he asked, and Joyce jumped beside him.

“Uh...” Jonathan said. “Hi, C-Chief Hopper.” Hopper heard a muffled, “El! You said it was a telemarketer!” before another, “What can I do for you?”

“Why are you at my house?” Hopper asked. “Are the girls okay?”

“Oh, oh, they’re...” Jonathan paused. “They’re fine. I just stopped by to... drop of a school book that... they left with Nancy...”

“Why didn’t Nancy drop it off?”

Pause. “She’s, uh... on a date with Steve?”



Jonathan was hiding something. “Where’s your brother?”

“At home.” Jonathan said. “I’m just getting back there...”

“Okay.” Hopper sighed. “Can... can you just tell the girls that I won’t be back tonight? If they want someone to stay over, they can call Nancy or... actually, could they stay at your place?”

He glanced at Joyce, and she nodded.

“Uh, uh, I guess, or... well, if Nancy can’t stay... I dunno, sure.” Jonathan said. “Uh, is my... is my Mom with you?”

Hopper paused. “Uh, yes. We’re... we’re trying to... well, to help your Brother. We can’t say much, but... do you want to talk to her?”

“Yes, that would be cool.”

Hopper handed Joyce the phone, and Joyce immediately said, “Jonathan, are you alright?” After a second, she added, “Where’s Will? ... Okay, just don’t leave him alone for too long, I don’t want him to get upset... just stay safe, I’ll be home soon. Hopper and I are trying to destroy that place, and then we can keep Will safe. Will you be alright? ... Okay, okay. Yes, I’ll see you soon... are you sure you’ll be okay? Do you need anything before I go? ... Okay... I love you, and I’ll see you soon.”

She turned to Hopper. “Do you want to say any more?” When he shook his head, she said, “Bye, Jonathan,” and hung up.

She looked to him and said, “Why is my son babysitting your kids?”

Hopper shrugged. “To be honest, I’ve stopped questioning a lot of things in my life.”

Meanwhile, Jonathan hung up and turned on El, who was taping three papers together. “You were some help.”

“It’s your own fault that you suck at charades.” El huffed. “And I’m *not* staying at your house tonight. I’m staying here til I figure out

what this goddamn picture is.”

Steve held Dustin’s hand as they walked through the woods.

“And you’re not gonna run.” Steve repeated.

Dustin nodded. “Apparently, you’re faster than me.”

They reached a clearing, where Dustin walked forwards and knocked on a hollow tree log. “Hey!” he called. “Hey, Lucas! We’ve got a visitor!”

Steve felt another jolt as he saw Lucas peer out of the log, and the boy’s eyes widened in shock as he saw the teenager.

“Dustin...” he said. “Dustin, we said no Steve. No Steve, no El, no-”

“He found *me*.” Dustin huffed. “It’s not my fault.”

“No, it is your fault, you little shits.” Steve said. “You’ve been gone for a year, I thought you were *dead*, and now you’re back and don’t even think to drop by and say ‘hello’?”

Lucas climbed out of the log, glancing at Dustin, before saying, “Not safe.”

Steve sighed. “Nothing’s safe in Hawkins, kid. What are you doing?”

The boys looked at each other. “Long story.” Dustin finally said.

“Really long.” Lucas added.

Steve sighed. “Here’s an idea. It’s getting late, what if you sleep at my place tonight, and then tomorrow, when it’s Saturday and at least one member of the family is definitely home, we’ll go get Hopper, and then you can explain to us what’s going on. I might not be much help in most cases, but Hopper’s a pretty safe person to go to.”

After a second, the boys nodded. “Haven’t slept in a house for a while.” Dustin said.

“Okay...” Lucas sighed. “Okay. But just one night, then an explanation, then we go back.”

Steve wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but he agreed, and the boys followed him home.

Nancy knew what she had to do.

She couldn’t take care of Mike on her own. She couldn’t just hide him anymore, especially since his teenage-rebellion had kicked in and he wanted to leave. And she was *seventeen*, she couldn’t even hold down a boyfriend, let alone raise a teenage boy. She needed help, and she knew who to ask.

So, after going home from school, doing her homework, and spending a bit too much time psyching herself up, she went over to Hopper’s house. If anyone in town knew anything about adopted children, it was him.

However, when she knocked on the door, it took almost a minute for someone to answer, and that someone was Jonathan Byers.

She stared at him for a solid minute, trying to figure out why her weird friend from school would be at the Hopper House.

“Uh... hi.” Jonathan said.

“Hi.” Nancy nodded. “Um... what are *you* doing here?”

“Uh...” Jonathan trailed off.

“*Jonathan!*” El’s voice came from another room. “*I need more tape!*”

“Why do you need tape?” Nancy asked.

Jonathan paused. “You... you may want to come inside.”

He let her in, and Nancy stepped into the Living Room, her mouth open in shock.

All around, the house was covered in colored papers, taped together into a long, connected line, looping around the walls and floors and even a couple on the ceiling. El was standing on a chair, holding two together. She turned to stare at Nancy, a guilty look on her face.

Nancy let out a long sigh. "El, what are you doing *now*?"

El paused. "Uh... Max is possessed by something from the Upside-Down and she's drawing this weird shit that all connects and we're trying to figure out what it is."

"Oh, good." Nancy quipped. "So nothing major." She looked around the room, at all the paper surrounding the walls. "What is it?"

"We're not sure." El said, "It looks like a Maze?"

Nancy looked around, trying to figure out what this thing was. "So," she asked as the wheels turned in her mind, "Max isn't okay?"

"What made you guess?" El huffed as Jonathan passed her a roll of tape.

"Shit..." Nancy touched the paper, trailing into another room. "Where's your Dad?"

"He and Ms. Byers are hunting down a way to destroy the Monster." El said. "He won't be back til tomorrow."

"Great..." Nancy sighed, then froze.

She recognized that shape of papers; that was Lovers' Lake. She and Steve had been there. Why was the paper trail in the shape of Lovers' Lake?

She slowly ran to Hopper's kitchen, opening one of the drawers and pulling out the Map she'd spotted in there last time she was at the house. She pulled it out, and went back to the papers; yes, that section was in the shape of Lovers' Lake. And the lines leading away matched the roads...

It was a map of Hawkins.

Why would Max's possessed hallucinations make a map of-

Oh, oh *shit*.

She dropped the Map on the floor and rushed past the other two, who were still in the first room. "I have to go," she said. "I have an idea, I'll be right back."

"Hey!" El called. "Hey, where the hell-"

Nancy didn't hear. She was on her way out.

Mike stared out the window.

He'd sat in the corner for all of yesterday, and all of today. He barely moved, and Nancy didn't talk to him that morning; he heard her knock, he unbolted the door, she left food on the table, and then she left.

He figured that made sense. She didn't want to talk to him, he didn't want to talk to her. He didn't want to talk to *anyone*.

But he eventually did move, going to the first floor and eating the cold Eggos she'd brought him. Then he stared out the window, watching the trees move in the breeze.

Eventually, he fell into his thoughts. He still felt *numb* from the day before, he felt like all of his friends were gone. Nancy had Steve, and she loved him so much she forgot she was supposed to stay with him. El had Max, who she loved so much she forgave her for saying those things about himself and the Others. And the Others were lost; he could *try* to track them, he supposed, but what if... what if they didn't want to be found? What if they didn't need him anymore?

He'd been terrified of that idea. Of tracking them down, and finding that they were happier and safer without him, without the monster that had opened the Gate. He didn't even dare track them, because what if he arrived, and found them, and they told him to go away, that he had ruined everything and they were better off without him and they didn't need him anymore?

Nobody needed him anymore.

He just... he *wanted* somebody who would love him. Somebody who could stay with him.

Wait. Wait... maybe he *could* find somebody.

He reached onto the pile of scattered, broken books, and picked up *A Little Princess*. He remembered when Nancy had been over, towards the beginning of his stay in the Treehouse, before he had a Dictionary, and he'd been reading the book. A passage, right at the beginning, had confused him: *Her mother had died when she was born, so she had never known or missed her.*

"What's a Mother?" he'd asked Nancy, confused about the use of the word that he'd never seen before and the author didn't think to describe.

She had to explain to him what parents were, how they brought life to kids, or at least took care of them, and that everybody had some.

"Even me?" he had asked.

She'd nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Where's my Mother?" he didn't want to ask about his Father, in fear that... well, in fear that it *was* Papa.

"She's..." Nancy sighed, then shook her head. "I don't know. She's probably not around."

"Oh."

But what did Nancy know? She'd never met his Mother. She didn't know anything about his Mother.

Who *would*?

He stopped, still staring at the trees outside. He remembered back to the year before, when he and Lucas and El had been in a house, and El had knocked down a chalkboard, and on the back was information about the Lab.

He bet there was more information there. He could probably find the Byers House, he remembered it being on the edge of the woods. He just hoped nobody would be there. But, no, they would be there at night. It was only during the day that Jonathan and his Mom weren't there, he assumed, since Nancy mentioned Jonathan was at school and Ms. Byers had work. So, tomorrow, he would sneak out again. He'd find his Mom, and he'd be with *her*.

He fell asleep early on his blankets, so he could be up early the next morning. He didn't even notice that Nancy didn't come that night, nor the next morning.

Nancy rushed into the open field, a shovel that she'd grabbed from her garage in her hand.

She dug into the ground, dug until her fingers hurt and the dirt was piling around her and the sky was darker and she couldn't stop until...

*There.*

There was a dark spot at the bottom of the hole, and she hit it with a shovel, watching something cave in. She kept hitting until there was a wide enough gap, and then she looked around. She should get some help, tell someone where she was... no, she couldn't leave. Not now.

She leapt inside, and looked around in horror.

Nancy was inside some tunnels. Dark, slimy tunnels. She had a *bad* feeling about this.

Nancy walked forwards, gripping the flashlight that thank *God* had been in her bag. Every now and again she thought she saw something move, thought she heard a deathly shriek, but she could never quite be sure.

She should have brought a weapon. *God*, why didn't she-

She walked into a room and made the mistake of shining a light on the ceiling. Something sprayed in her face, and she screamed,

running backwards and coughing, before she passed out on the ground.

And the tunnel above her closed up.



## 17. Found

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

#### *Found*

El woke up on the floor, surrounded by sheets of paper. She'd been prodded awake by Max, who still had her hair up and still had an emotionless expression. "Nancy." she said.

"What?" El asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Nancy." Max repeated, something dark in her otherwise blank voice. "I saw her. She's in trouble. I think she's going to die."

Nancy woke up in the tunnel, gasping for air. She leaned over and threw something up- some kind of slime- and stumbled to her feet, struggling to breathe. She managed to grab her flashlight, running ahead. She thought of calling for someone, *anyone*, but who would hear her?

She suddenly reached a dead end. Shouldn't her exit have appeared before now?

"Shit!" she yelled, and ran down another tunnel. She had to get out.

She slowly ripped part off the edge of her jacket, and ran through the tunnel that had sprayed things at her before. She didn't want to breathe in any bullshit again.

She kept walking, and eventually she started to see the slime move around her. They were tendrils, creepy tendrils, and she tried to ignore the way they moved a little towards her as she moved.

Nancy finally entered a larger area, walking ahead with caution. She glanced down at her flashlight, which was starting to flicker a little, and got an idea. She whipped the flashlight towards tendrils on the

wall, and they moved. So, they didn't like light. Well, she could show them some light.

She reached into her pocket, and eventually found her box of matches. Thank God. She pulled out a match and lit it, throwing fire onto the tendrils. She heard shrieks, and smiled.

That was, until she tripped.

She landed, knocking her head against the wall. She started to shake, and then she started to cough. She wasn't sure what was going on, but she realized that there probably wasn't that much breathable air down there.

Shit. She was going to die in the tunnels alone, because she hadn't waited for five minutes to tell Jonathan and El where the hell she was going.

And she didn't notice the tendril creeping up her leg.

Jonathan woke up early the next day and peeked into Will's room first. "Hey," he said, "I'm gonna go back to the Hoppers'. They're having trouble figuring out a problem, I'm gonna help. Will you be okay on your own?"

Will, who was already awake and doodling, nodded and smiled at him.

"Great." Jonathan said. "Uh, see you soon. You've got Hopper's number written down, call if you need anything."

Will waited until he left, waited to hear the front door slam, until he made his move.

He jumped to his feet, grabbing all his leftover food and shoving it into a bag. He slung it over his shoulder and climbed out the window again, running towards the Shed.

He started dropping the food, leading towards the inside of the Shed. If he could get Gray inside, he could hold him there until Hopper

returned.

So he spread out the food, ducked behind one of the Shed Walls, and waited.

After quite a long a while, he heard a small shriek, and footsteps coming closer. He held his breath, waiting for him to get into the shed. *Get into the Shed.*

Gray stopped right before entering the door, and Will thought he heard some kind of sniffing. Oh, no. He'd *spotted* him.

Will slowly turned around, feeling a surge of terror as he stared Gray in the face.

He jumped to his feet, backing up. Gray peered at him, screeching again. Will could barely breathe, fear racing through his body.

Suddenly, Gray turned and ran. Will came to his senses, and grabbed a broken board from the ground. He started chasing the animal, running into the woods. He had to catch it, and he had to *stop it*.

Whatever that took.

Jonathan walked into El's house, and El rushed to him, hugging him tight.

"Oh, Jonathan, thank God, Nancy's in trouble!"

Immediately, Jonathan tensed up. *No, no, Nancy couldn't be in trouble. No...*

"What?"

El grabbed his hand, dragging him to the kitchen, where Max had drawn a large, red circle on one of the papers. "Nancy is here." she said as they entered.

"What does that *mean*?" El asked.

"I *don't know!*" Max groaned, running her hands through the strands of hair that had fallen from her bun. "I don't know, I just know that she's *here!*"

"What's wrong with her?" Jonathan asked, unable to keep his panic from reaching his voice. "What happened?"

"I don't know!" Max yelled. "But I know she's *here* and she's in trouble!"

"Where is *here*?" Jonathan asked.

"I *don't know!*"

Before they could say anything else, the doorbell rang. They turned to each other, and El said, "I'll get it. You two stay here."

She ran to the door, and paused before opening it. It probably wasn't her Dad- he had a key- but who else would be at her house? She took a quick, steadying breath, then opened the door, saying sharply, "What the *hell* is it now?"

She froze when she saw Steve standing there, looking very shocked, and holding hands with Dustin and Lucas, who both looked incredibly guilty.

They stared for a good long while. El didn't want to move too fast, for fear she'd scare them off, and yet she also felt like she *couldn't* move, because they were *there*. They were *right in front of her*. They'd come *back*.

Steve spoke first. "Um, hi, El. We, uh, came to talk to your Dad, but... well, since you're here, the boys would like to say something to you, wouldn't you, boys?"

The boys glanced at each other, and then Lucas said, "Hi, El."

Dustin continued. "We're sorry that we hid from you for a year, and ran away when we saw you, and stole stuff from your trash."

"When did you do *that*?" Steve asked.

Dustin shrugged.

“We didn’t want you to get hurt.” Lucas said. “The... the Lab’s still here, and the thing we’re doing, we didn’t want-”

El simply walked forwards and hugged him.

Lucas jumped, but very quickly hugged her back. Dustin ran forwards, too, and suddenly they were all hugging, all together, and El started to cry, grabbing onto them. They were *there*. *They were there!*

“I missed you.” she said.

“We missed you, too.” Lucas said.

“We talked about you pretty much every day.” Dustin added, giggling a little.

El eventually pulled away, glancing back into the house and wiping her eyes on her sleeve. She wanted to just talk to them, find out what had happened, tell them about everything, but... well, there were a lot of pressing matters right now. “Um, you said you wanted to talk to my Dad? He’s, uh, he’s not home but-” Suddenly, something hit her. “S-Steve, you’re dating Nancy, right?”

Steve paused. “Uh, well... not *exactly* ... um-”

“Do you know where she is?”

Steve caught onto the scared edge in her voice, and asked, “Why?”

El paused, looking between the people on her porch, and said, “You’re just in time, boys. We *really* need your help.”

## 18. Going Home

### Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow's chapter might be a little late, just a head's up: I'm sleeping over at a friend's house and won't be back til around the time I usually start posting. In the meantime... yeah this was a lot of angst and really fun to write lol

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

#### *Going Home*

El walked into the kitchen, where Jonathan and Max were still arguing. They both looked up at her, and she said, "Uh, guys? There's, uh... in the living room."

"What?" they both asked, confused.

El gestured, and they followed her to the Living Room, where Steve was tracing the lines of paper, and Dustin and Lucas were sitting on the floor, waiting.

It took Max a second to realize who the two boys were, and then her eyes widened and she stepped back, shocked. Jonathan stared at them all, surprised and confused. The boys stared back for a second, then Dustin waved.

"Max," El said, "Uh, this is Lucas and Dustin."

"Oh my God." Max said.

"Yeah, yeah, it's all very touching." Steve said, turning to them and crossing his arms. "What's this I hear about Nancy in danger?"

Max still stared at the boys in disbelief as she said, "I... I saw her, in my now-memories. She's in trouble, and... in the kitchen, on the red circle."

Steve ran past them into the other room, and Jonathan paused before following.

After a second, Max said, "So... you did see them. Oh my God..."

"It's okay, Max." El said, reaching out to take her hand, and leading her closer to the boys. "It's okay, I get it. Why don't you meet them? Boys, this is Max."

"Max." Lucas greeted.

Dustin paused, looking at her, before he said, "I've seen you."

"You have?" Max asked.

Dustin nodded. "In a Vision."

"Oh." Max said, glancing to the floor as she and El sat down by the boys. "Wh-what happened?"

Dustin didn't answer, instead saying, "We really wanted to meet you last year, but the Bad Men were coming and we had to leave."

"Where did you go?" El asked, glancing between Max and the boys.

"Away." Lucas said. "We ran for a while, then we... Dustin had a Vision, and we tried to find our families."

"Your families?" El asked. "You mean, your parents?"

They didn't meet her eye as they nodded.

"It took a while," Dustin said, "But we figured out how to use the Computers in the Library-"

"We lived in a Library." Lucas interjected. "It was fun."

"-and we looked us up." Dustin added. "Well, looked up the Lab and the people who were there and had babies."

"Well, what did you find?" Max asked.

The boys looked at each other and then pressed their hands together

for comfort as Lucas said, “We don’t have a family anymore.”

“Oh.” El said. “Boys, I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Lucas said, though his expression said otherwise. “We have each other.”

“We lived in the Library some more.” Dustin continued, brushing the subject aside. “And then I had a vision of... of a Monster here. And we came to... to find it. We... we knew it probably wasn’t safe here, so we didn’t want to get you involved, and the Lab-”

El sighed and reached forwards, placing her hands on top of the boys’. “Listen, I don’t care how dangerous it is. I want to help you. You guys are my friends.”

Dustin and Lucas smiled at her. “Thank you,” Lucas said.

After a second, El leaned back and asked, “Did you... did you guys find anything about...”

The boys sadly shook their heads. Lucas then asked, “Do you know where Twelve is?”

“Will?” El asked. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, he’s safe, he found his Mom.”

Lucas and Dustin lit up. “Can we see him?” Lucas asked.

“I don’t see why not.” El said. “But, like, first we kinda have to find Nancy before she... gets hurt.”

Lucas and Dustin nodded, and El asked, “Dustin, did you... can you see where she is?”

Dustin paused. “Not in any visions I’ve had recently. I could try to force one-”

“No.” Lucas grabbed his hand tightly. “You hate that.”

“I can *try*-”

Max finally said something, having been staring at the wall for the



last few minutes. “Where are Jonathan and Steve?”

“Kids!” Steve poked his head in the room. “Kids, we have something!”

El jumped to her feet and ran after him, closely followed by Lucas and Dustin. Max simply sat on the floor, staring ahead, before she slowly got up and followed them.

He’d found it.

Mike ran towards the Byers House, trying to open the door the normal way first, and then using his powers to unlock it and pushing his way inside. The house had changed very little over the last year, though it took Mike a couple tries to figure out which room was the Office. He finally spotted the chalkboard on the wall, and entered the room.

He was immediately confused to see a bed in the corner. The curtains were also taped together, which was strange because the window seemed to be open behind them. Mike, however, only briefly puzzled over this before moving on to the drawers. If there was information on his Mother, it would probably be in one of them.

It took him about four tries, digging through seemingly empty drawers, to accidentally hit onto a false bottom. “Cool...” he muttered to himself, as he opened it and paused. Why was this one filled with clothes? He dug through them, but didn’t find anything suspicious. Maybe they were Jonathan’s old clothes. But why under a false bottom?

He kept going through drawers, figuring to check for false bottoms this time. When he finally found one that looked promising, he’d already gone through at least eight different drawers.

He dug out three files: he spent several minutes flipping through the first one, seeing only information on the Lab’s founding and written notes on something labelled “MKUltra”. The second file took a slightly shorter time, as it was mostly just information on workers in

the Lab, and Mike didn't really feel like looking at those faces, especially since most of them were quite familiar.

Finally, he opened the third file, and out dropped the papers he needed.

He flipped through the papers, seeing mainly newspaper clippings of kidnapped or missing children. He skimmed the descriptions, looking for one that sounded like him or his brothers, but it was a lot of kids he didn't recognize. He spotted a sixteen-year-old getting abducted from Ohio, a young girl who'd been taken from London, with an attached picture, and a newborn boy taken from the Hospital that seemed like it might be one of them until he checked the date and noticed that the math didn't add up.

He finally found what he was looking for towards the bottom of the pile. He probably would have only skimmed the piece of paper- it wasn't a newspaper article, but a handwritten letter, and he had trouble reading handwriting- but something else caught his attention. A scrap of paper was paperclipped to the top corner of the letter, and it looked to be a drawing. A drawing of *him*.

Mike dropped the rest of the papers, looking at the clipping. It was definitely him, though it was from when his hair was all shaved off. How did the Byers get this?

After a second, he moved onto the letter. It was pretty short- only about half the page- and honestly not too hard to read.

It was addressed to Joyce, and the first paragraph was mostly asking how she was, how was Jonathan, did she find a job, had she heard from "Lonnie" since the "divorce", stuff like that. The second paragraph, though, was what interested Mike.

*I heard about Will, and I would like to say that I'm so sorry that happened to you. Losing a child is such a terrible thing; ever since I lost my son I haven't been the same. I sometimes wonder if I hadn't agreed to those experiments, maybe he would've been born healthy. We didn't even have a name for him, we were just hoping it would come to us. I've been calling him Teddy in my head- after Ted, of course- and I don't know if I'll ever get over the loss. If you want to talk to somebody about what*

*you're feeling, I'm right here for you.*

The rest of the letter was more questions about life, but Mike could barely even skim it. He was shaking, staring down at the letter. *Teddy.*

The letter was signed with *Karen Wheeler*. Karen Wheeler.

Teddy Wheeler.

Mike took a breath and held the letter, then picked up the drawing of him. He was surprised when he felt another photo underneath it; he flipped over the doodle, and saw a photo.

Oh. Was that a photo of *her*?

He stared at the picture, looking over every detail of her face, still not quite processing it. He'd found her. He'd found his Mom. She kind of had his face shape, he noticed, though her hair was much lighter. A thought came up that she looked a bit like Nancy, too, but he pushed that thought down, not wanting to think about the teenager at the moment.

Now, if he could just *find* his Mother...

He reached into his pocket and sat on the floor, among the files and papers, and pulled out his blindfold, tying it around his face and focusing on the image of his Mother that the picture gave him.

"Find Mother." he whispered to himself. "*Find Mother.*"

He opened his eyes when he couldn't feel the blindfold anymore, and found himself in the Mind Place. He spun around in the darkness, trying to find his Mother, trying to find Karen Wheeler. He *had* to find her, and then they could be together...

He spotted her in the distance, and broke into a run, calling even though he knew she couldn't hear him. "Mother! *Mother!*"

He stopped in front of her. She didn't seem as sad as he thought she'd be, but... well, he didn't *want* her to be sad, so this was a good thing, right? She was talking to somebody, saying something about not

coloring on the walls. Who could be with her? His Dad? Or...

*No.*

He slowly let his thoughts expand, trying to see who was with her, who she was talking to. And his heart sank when he saw a little girl run up to her. She had blonde hair, pulled into two pigtails, and was giggling and smiling, paint splattered across her face and hands. She giggled and ran up to Karen, hugging her and getting paint all over her outfit. Karen laughed, too, and picked the girl up, saying something like, "It's alright, you'll learn. You look very pretty."

The little girl giggled, and Mike stepped away.

Mother didn't need him. She had another child. She'd replaced him, she didn't need him anymore.

Karen had her daughter. Nancy had Steve. El had Max. Lucas, Dustin and Will had each other.

He had no one.

He blinked out of the Mind Place, ripped the blindfold off of his head, and started to cry.

*He had no one.*

## 19. Into the Woods

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

#### *Into the Woods*

Jonathan slammed a map on the table. “We found this on the floor. And check this out.”

He took a marker and drew a line around Lovers’ Lake, then pointed up at a shape the papers made on the wall.

“That part looks like Lovers’ Lake?” El clarified.

“Look here, though.” Steve said, moving to another part of the wall. “That’s Lake Jordan.”

“Holy shit.” El said, and turned to Max, who was staring at the papers and starting to look pale.

“I don’t get it.” Dustin said, looking from the Map to the pictures.

“It’s a Map, kid!” Steve said.

“A map of Hawkins.” Jonathan added. “It’s a Map, not a Puzzle; see, it’s like roads, and they don’t go over water.”

“So the red spot where Nancy is,” El said, “That’s an actual place...”

“El, do you have a measuring tape?” Jonathan asked, looking up at her.

“Uh, yeah.” El nodded. “Yeah, I think we’ve got a three.”

“We’re gonna measure the spaces inbetween the roads, and we’ll be able to pinpoint where Nancy is.” Jonathan said, “And then we’ll find her.”

El whipped around, turning to the others. “Lucas, Dustin, you both

get one tape. Steve, you'll get another, and me and Max will share. Max, come on. Let's see how fast we can get this done."

Will had lost Gray about two hours ago, and now he was stuck in the woods.

He kept following what he thought might be a slime trail, listening for a screech, or at the very least trying to find a path that looked familiar. He supposed that he probably should have realized what a bad plan it was to rush after a dangerous animal into a forest he'd barely been in, after a year of not even being *outside* and a lifetime before that of never leaving laboratories.

He finally spotted a broken tree that he recognized, and sighed with relief, sitting down and trying to figure out from which angle he'd seen it before. However, by the time he thought he found out which direction he came from, he heard footsteps in the woods.

He paused, turning and looking towards the sound, and then he heard a voice. It was saying lots of big words, but he recognized "The creature is nearby" and "We found a half-eaten rodent just a few feet away."

It took Will a second for his thoughts to catch up to him, and then he jumped to his feet. He had to *move*, he had to get away from this guy before he saw him.

Too late.

Will could only freeze in terror as a man walked past a low-hanging branch, talking into a radio communicator. The man looked at him in surprise, and said, "Hey, kid, what are you doing here?"

Will could only stare at the man's uniform. He knew that uniform. He'd seen it every day for the first twelve years of his life.

So, all he could do was turn and run.

Mike heard the men outside, but it took him a minute to react.

He'd cried for who knew how long, and then he'd just gone numb, lying on the floor among the papers and files, not caring if the Byers came home and found him, or if Nancy realized he was missing from the treehouse, or if nobody ever came and he just laid there forever. Nobody would care if he just disappeared.

However, some sort of instinct came in when he heard the walkie-talkies buzz outside, and the men say "The house may have been contaminated, the creature might still be inside."

Mike slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes as he heard more people arrive. He couldn't see any specifics from the shapes outside the window, but something was starting to unnerve him about them. Something familiar.

Then he heard, "If we catch it, we'll bring it back to the Lab."

Back to the Lab.

*Back to the Lab.*

They'd found him.

Mike suddenly found a surge of energy again, jumping up and preparing to flee. He *wasn't* going back to that place, not now, not ever. He was preparing to run, but he glanced at the floor for a second, and spotted the papers. He paused. Those Lab people would find the files, and they'd take them.

He dropped to the ground, collecting as many papers as he could and shoving them back into the files, before grabbing them off the ground and clutching them to his chest, running outside the room and towards the door. He stopped, however, when he heard the knob turn. Of course, of course they would come in through the front door.

He rushed back into the Office, breathing hard, and went to the window. Somebody had been outside it, but maybe they'd gone around the house by the back. Mike ducked behind the curtains, and felt relieved when he saw that the window was indeed open, with nobody in sight. He clutched the files under one arm as he placed his

hand on the windowsill and pushed himself out, glancing around wildly to see if the Bad Men were close. He slowly started to move around the wall, glancing over the corner and flinching back when he saw people surrounding the Shed several feet away. They hadn't seen him, he didn't think, and he peered around again, trying to see if he could spot an escape route.

Instead, his eyes fell on a boy running out of the woods.

He didn't recognize him at first; he felt a bit of worry when the boy stopped in front of the shed, staring in horror at the men around it. However, then he looked closer, and his heart stopped.

*Twelve.*

His first thought was, *Twelve is here*. His second thought was, *They see him, too*.

"Hey, kid!" one of the men yelled, turning towards him. "Get outta here!"

Twelve blinked at him, then rushed back into the forest.

Mike glanced at the men at the Shed; they didn't seem to be following the boy, they just seemed interested in something over there. So, he took a deep breath, and rushed out, running towards the woods, trying to ignore the yelling of the men as they spotted him, hoping and praying that they didn't follow him. He could barely see Twelve running ahead of him, jumping over logs and tripping over roots, and he had to try and put on a burst of speed, hoping to catch up.

He waited until he was certain that they were far away, that nobody was behind him, that the Bad Men couldn't hear him, to finally call out.

*"Twelve!"*

His scream was much louder than he intended, and he also didn't intend for it to break, for his desperation to sound with his words. But he yelled, and then he stopped running, and so did Twelve.



Twelve froze in place, apparently shocked, and then he slowly turned. The boys stared at each other for a long while, and then Mike slowly came closer. Twelve stepped back, panicked; he didn't seem to recognize him.

"T-Twelve?" he asked, stepping forwards. Yes, it was him! He was there, he was in front of him now, he could *see him*.

Twelve jumped at the familiar voice, and looked closer at the boy's face, slowly realizing who was in front of him.

"Eleven." Twelve said, breathlessly, staring at him in disbelief.

Mike took a deep breath, then rushed forwards and threw his arms around the other boy, dropping the files onto the ground behind them. Twelve hugged him back, and they were both clutching each other, and they were *together*.

## 20. Going Away

### CHAPTER TWENTY

#### *Going Away*

“So,” Mike said carefully, “You found your Mother?”

Will nodded, rocking back and forth. They were both sitting on the forest floor, and Mike had picked up the files again, holding them in his lap as they talked. “Her name’s Joyce Byers.” he said. “She’s really nice. She doesn’t forget to feed me, and she tries to make me happy when I’m upset and doesn’t yell or anything. And I’ve got Jonathan, too! He’s my brother!”

“That’s great.” Mike said, smiling a little.

Will paused. “Where... where have you been?”

Mike flinched. “Um, I... I’ve been living with Nancy.”

“Nancy?” Will asked, eyes widening. “We didn’t tell her where I am, maybe she could have-”

“She didn’t want me to leave.” Mike interrupted. “Or talk to anyone. Too dangerous.”

After a pause, Will said, “Yeah, I’m the same. I only left the house because... well, one of...”

“What?”

“Um...” Will sighed. “There’s... I don’t know, but the Bad People are at my house now, so I can’t go back, not until they leave. Mom’s not going to be back for a while, and Jonathan left to go visit a friend... maybe we should go and find him.” He noticed Mike’s silence, and asked, “Wh-why were *you* in my house?”

Mike bit his lip and glanced away, before he finally admitted, “I was

looking for my Mom.”

“Oh.” Will’s eyes flickered to the files that Mike held. “Oh, I never actually looked at those, I didn’t want to think about... did you find her?”

Mike nodded.

“That’s great!”

“No.” Mike said. “I found her in the Mind Place. She’s got another baby now.”

“Oh...” Will said.

“She replaced me.” Mike tried to keep his voice from cracking. “She forgot me.”

“No.” Will said, reaching forwards and grabbing Mike’s hands. “No, I’m sure she didn’t. My Mom tells me lots that she never forgot me, and I’m sure your Mom didn’t, either.”

Mike took a deep breath to keep himself from crying. He wasn’t sure that he believed him, but he didn’t want to talk about it currently, so he smiled and said, “You’re talking. A lot.”

Will giggled. “You have hair!” He reached forwards and started ruffling his friend’s hair, and Mike started laughing, too.

Once they calmed down, Will said, “I can’t go back home, not until the Bad People leave.”

“You could stay with me.” Mike offered. “Nancy’s mad at me so she probably won’t see you.”

Will considered, then said, “Mike, have you... have you been having weird dreams?”

“What?”

“I’ve...” Will sighed. “I’ve been having dreams about Eight.”

“Eight?”

“I don’t think you met her.” Will said. “We were friends, I think, before I went to Hawkins. They said she was gone, but I’ve just been dreaming and...”

Mike picked up one of the files, flipping it open and passing it towards Will. “Is she in here?”

Will looked through the papers, eyes going wide as he saw all the articles. “What’s this?”

“About our siblings.” Mike said. “The other numbers.”

Will skimmed the articles, looking for information, and finally found the page he was looking for. “Eight...” he said, holding up a clipping. Mike moved to peer over his shoulder, and saw the article about the missing girl in London.

“Kali Prasad.” Mike read the name that was given on the paper. “Pretty.”

“That’s her.” Will confirmed.

Mike reached out, taking the paper and moving back to his original spot, sitting and grabbing his blindfold out of his pocket. “Here.”

“What are you doing?” Will asked worriedly.

“Finding Eight.” Mike said, tying the blindfold around his eyes.

“So, is it enough?”

Hopper glanced between Joyce, who held out the tape recording in her hand, and Murray, who was sitting on the couch and staring at nothing. The three of them had entered a room with a wall that resembled Joyce’s conspiracy map, detailing Barb Holland’s disappearance and theories about the mysterious boys who were supposedly Russian Experiments. Joyce seemed to dislike the loud man as much as Hopper did, but she definitely hid it better, and

simply turned around and explained what had happened over the year, as well as playing him the recording of Owens at the Lab.

“Hello? Is it enough?” Joyce asked again, and Murray slowly got to his feet and left the room. “Is it incriminating? Can we use this?”

“What the hell...” Hopper said, and they followed him into his kitchen, where he was pouring himself a cup of vodka.

“What are you doing?” Joyce asked.

“Thinking.” Murray responded.

“With vodka?” Hopper raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a central nervous system depressant.” Murray explained. “So, yes, with vodka.”

He moved past them again, going into another room and placing a record onto a player. Joyce gave Hopper a look, and asked, “Is he always like this?”

“Sort of.”

Murray started wandering farther into the room, and Joyce walked forwards, asking, “How long is this going to *take*?”

“Longer if you keep talking.”

“Listen,” Joyce hissed, “I have two sons at home that I need to get back to, and Hopper has two daughters. Is the tape incriminating or not? It’s a simple question-”

Murray laughed. “There’s nothing simple about it, nothing simple about anything you told me.”

“What? You don’t believe us?” Hopper asked, coming forwards. “You know me, Murray, I wouldn’t be here if this wasn’t true.”

“Oh, I believe you.” Murray said. “That’s not the problem; you don’t need me to believe you, you need *them* to believe you.”

“Them?” Hopper asked.

“*Them*, with a capital *T*.” Murray gestured out the window. “Your priest, your postman, your teacher, the world at large. They won’t believe any of this.”

“That’s what the tape is for.” Joyce seemed to be getting frustrated.

“Oh, that’s easy to bury.”

“He *admits* to everything!” Joyce said. “To the Upside-Down, to the human experimentation, to kidnapping children-”

“You’re being naive, Joyce.” Murray interrupted. “Those people, they’re not wired like us, okay? They don’t spend their lives trying to get a look at what’s behind the curtain. They like the curtain. It provides them stability, comfort, definition. This... this would open the curtain, and open the curtain behind that curtain, okay? So the minute someone with an ounce of authority calls bullshit, everyone will nod their heads and say, ‘See? Ha! I knew it. It was bullshit.’ That is, if you get their attention at all.”

“So, what? This was all for nothing?” Joyce yelled back.

“I’m saying, ‘I’m thinking!’” Murray took a swig of the vodka, then made a face and went back to the kitchen. He started to pour some water into the cup, then paused. “That’s it. That’s it.”

“What?” Joyce turned on him. “Finally came up with *something*?”

“It’s just too strong. Too strong.” Murray said, continuing to pour water in and then taking another swig. “Better.”

Hopper gave Joyce a look as Murray continued to pour water in, trying to communicate with his eyes that he was ready to leave the man to his ramblings, but Joyce seemed to be thinking of something. Murray drank the vodka again, and said, “Perfect.”

“We water it down.” Joyce said.

“Exactly!” Murray added.

“Wait, what?” Hopper said. “Is this some kinda conspiracy code or-”

“Your story. We moderate it.” Murray said. “Just like this drink here. We make it more tolerable. Perhaps Barbara was exposed to some dangerous toxins.”

“A leak from the Lab?” Joyce interjected.

“What, like Three Mile Island or something?” Hopper asked.

“Something scary but familiar.” Murray said, pouring two more drinks. “Close enough that it hits the Man right where it hurts.”

“And what about the kids?” Hopper asked.

“The Lab gets shut down,” Joyce said, “They’ll stop looking for them.”

“It’ll all get shut down.” Murray nodded, and passed the two others cups of vodka, a silent toast.

“Here!” Jonathan yelled, drawing a circle on the map.

“That’s where Nancy is?” El asked, running over and dropping the measuring tape onto the ground. The others followed her, gathering around the teenager.

“Well, it’s not exact, but since we’re in a hurry, this is the best we got.” Jonathan said.

“Are you sure?” Max asked, looking a little concerned.

Jonathan nodded. “This is as close as we’re going to get.”

“Come on, then.” Steve said. “We’ll take my car.”

“Let’s go!” Dustin cheered.

“No, no!” Steve reached out and grabbed Lucas and Dustin, dragging them back. “*You* two are staying here.”

“What?” Dustin yelled.

“But we can help!” Lucas added. “I’ve been working on my shards and shield and-”

“That’s not *why* I’m making you stay.” Steve said, glaring down at the boys. “We’re going to be out in the goddamn open, and you two are trying to stay hidden.”

“We can...” Dustin said, though he and Lucas both understood his point, not that they were going to admit it.

“Stay here.” El jumped in, smiling at the boys. “Me and Max’ll go, and then we’ll be back real soon.”

“We can *help*!” Lucas protested.

“Boys, I...” El paused, now giving them a much more serious look, “I just got you back. If you got hurt, if the Lab got to you... I can’t let anything happen to you. Not now.”

The boys looked at each other in silence, and El added, “I’ll be back before you know it. I won’t even get hurt.”

“Promise?” Lucas asked.

“Of course.” El nodded, turning to the others. “Let’s go.”



## 21. Dig Dug

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#### *Dig Dug*

“There’s *nothing* here!” El yelled, staring out the window.

Next to her, Max glanced away from the window and sat back, huffing. “Nothing on my side, either.”

“Are we close?” Steve asked, glancing to Jonathan in the other seat, who was scanning the map.

“Somewhat.” Jonathan said.

“What’s this ‘somewhat’ shit?” Steve groaned.

“It don’t know, it’s not precise.” Jonathan sighed. “The scale ratio isn’t exactly-”

“I don’t give a *damn*, we need to get to Nancy!” Steve yelled.

El gave another groaned and thudded into the backseat. Next to her, Max stared ahead, feeling something in the back of her head. She recognized the feeling, and her first instinct was to fight it off, to ignore it and keep going. But... if it could help Nancy...

She shut her eyes, focusing only on the memories leaking into her mind, as Steve and Jonathan’s argument drowned out, and the darkness started letting her see ahead.

“Turn left!” Max suddenly shouted, opening her eyes.

“What?” Steve asked.

“I saw her.”

“Where?”

“Not here. In my now-memories.”

“In your *what?*” Steve glanced to the others

El groaned. “Just turn left, Harrington!”

Steve made a sharp turn to the right, and in a flash, they ran into a pile of dirt. Everyone screamed, and the car skidded to a stop right in front of a deep hole, landing almost at the edge.

“You assholes alive?” Steve asked, turning around.

El meekly nodded, and Max simply said, “I could’ve driven better.”

“Alright, we’re getting out.” Jonathan said after giving the kids a quick look, and him and Steve opened their doors.

“No, no, it’s not safe!” Max shouted, a deep dread appearing both in her chest and in the back of her head.

“And that’s why we’re going, and you’re staying here.” Steve said, turning to the others. “Stay here!”

They jumped out of the car, and the girls turned to each other.

“What did you see?” El asked.

“I dunno, there was darkness, and I just... felt her.” Max said, shaking a little and gripping the edge of the chair. “And there’s something with her, something... dark.”

“Are you okay?”

Max shook her head. “El, am I going crazy?”

El reached out and grabbed her hand. “You’re not. We’re going to kill this bastard, and then we’ll be fine.”

“But what if we *don’t*?”

El paused. “Then we’ll go crazy together.”

Steve and Jonathan slid down the pit, finding a dark spot. At first, Jonathan thought it was a puddle, but then it started to squirm. "Vines." he said, staring down at it.

"Wonderful." Steve said. "I'll be right back."

He ran back up to the car, opening the trunk. Jonathan glanced at him, then turned to the ground and saw a shovel peering out of the dirt. He grabbed at it and started pounding at the vines. They jumped, letting out an inhuman screech, and Jonathan leapt back. He was about to move forwards and try again, and then Steve slid back down, something in his hands.

"Stand back." he said, and he pounded at the vines with a baseball bat, nails sticking out of the top.

The vines screamed again, and Jonathan slowly approached to join him, and the two of them managed to get the vines to retreat.

"You still have that?" Jonathan asked, looking up at the bat.

"Just in case." Steve shrugged. "Come on, we're going in."

Jonathan nodded, and the two jumped into the hole. They looked around at the dark, wet tunnel, and Steve said, "What the *hell* is this?"

"Nancy!" Jonathan yelled, starting to walk in one direction. "*Nancy!*"

Steve pulled out a flashlight, and they started to move, going in one direction and calling.

"Nancy! *Nancy!*"

"What is that?" El asked.

The two girls had jumped out of the car about a minute after they were sure the boys had left, and had slowly approached the hole in the center of the pit.

Max was eerily quiet, staring down at the hole.

“Do you see anything?” El prompted. “About them? In your... now-memories?”

Max shook her head, but she had a bad feeling.

A loud screech of tires sounded behind them, and the girls whipped around, seeing vans start to pull up behind them. Vans labelled *Hawkins Power and Light*.

“Shit.” El said.

“Jonathan!”

Jonathan turned around, and Steve held up a match. “Is that hers?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t know!” Steve yelled. “But it’s *something*! Let’s try this way.”

They didn’t have any other clues, so down that tunnel they went, screaming and calling some more. They turned a bend, and suddenly Nancy’s bag was in front of them, items spread across the floor.

“Shit!” Steve yelled, staring down at the items.

Jonathan turned the flashlight, and suddenly caught a glimpse of an arm. He jumped, and rushed forwards. “Nancy!” he yelled, and bent down, pushing a vine aside and gasping as he saw her face.

Nancy was pale, *too* pale, and the vines were wrapped around her body, one wrapped almost completely around her neck. Steve swore some more, dropping down beside Jonathan as he tried to drag the vine away from her.

“You’re choking her!” Steve yelled.

Nancy opened her mouth, then, and managed to speak. “Knife...”

“What?” Jonathan and Steve both asked.

“Knife.” Nancy said, and gestured her arm towards the left.

Steve grabbed the flashlight from Jonathan, shining it onto an open pocketknife. Jonathan rushed over and grabbed it, before running back and grabbing the vine, chopping it away. He heard another screech, and he started cutting more vines. They squirmed and slashed forwards, hitting both Jonathan and Steve on the arm. Once her hand was free, Nancy placed it on the ground and struggled to get up, trying to get away from the vines around her.

Finally, Jonathan cut a final vine, and Nancy got to her feet, kicking the remains away and gasping and shaking. He dropped the knife to the ground, rushing ahead and grabbing her by the shoulders. “Nancy! Nancy, are you okay?”

“Jonathan?” she asked, and her eyes widened as Steve ran over, too.

“Are you okay?” Jonathan asked again.

“Yeah, yeah...” Nancy suddenly grabbed Jonathan in a quick hug, burying her face in his chest and sighing with relief. She pulled away after a second, suddenly spotting Steve. “Uh... hi, Steve.”

“Nancy, what happened?” Steve asked. “Are you hurt, what do we need to-”

“Oh, God!” Nancy yelled, gesturing down. They all looked, seeing the vines creeping forwards again.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed Jonathan’s arm, and he was pulled away. He looked up, seeing somebody completely covered in a Hazmat suit, screaming, “Go! Go! Go!”

Nancy and Steve were pushed towards him, too, and more men in suits ran in, pushing them away, shouting to clear the area. Nancy only barely managed to grab her bag- and whatever was left inside- off the ground, before they were all shepherded out, and the men pointed flamethrowers forwards, shooting into the vines.

The girls were staring around at all the scientists and army men

running around, rushing into the tunnels, screaming for reinforcements, when Max dropped to the ground.

“Max? Max, are you okay?” El asked, kneeling next to her and trying to steady her, but Max was on her stomach, convulsing and whimpering. “Max? Max! Max, what happened?”

Max suddenly flipped around, staring up at the sky and letting out an unholy scream, and El was so startled that she jumped back. Max was screaming and rattling on the ground, and El could do nothing but watch as the scientists ran towards them.

## 22. Burning

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

#### *Burning*

Mike climbed up the ladder, waving a clump of money in his hand that he'd dug out from the dirt in the flowerpot. "Nancy said that this was for emergencies, for if the Bad Men came while she was gone and I had to run. But I think this is better."

Will was sitting on his blankets and waiting. Mike noticed that he'd grabbed several books from the floor, and was looking over them with a keen interest. "Books!" he said.

"Yeah, Nancy brought them." Mike said, glancing away from the spot on the floor where the remains of *The Princess Bride* were. "And we should go before she gets back and catches you."

Will nodded, but stared down at the books some more. "I read this one," he said, holding up *Little Women*. "Well, a little bit of it. Mom really likes it but I wanted to read the science stuff instead."

"I haven't finished either." Mike shook his head as Will dropped the book. "Your Mom brought you books, too?"

Will nodded, smiling brightly. "Lots. But I don't have these." He gestured to the books in his hands, and Mike spotted *Pride and Prejudice*, *Anne of Green Gables* and *Alice in Wonderland* among them. "Can we bring them?"

Mike paused, before saying, "I don't have a bag, and we can't carry that much. Maybe we can find them later."

He didn't say *You can read them when we get back*. He hadn't told Will yet, but he didn't know if he wanted to return. Will was the only one who needed him, and even then, Will would probably go back once his house was clear. But if Eight needed him, if he could find a way to help her... well, then he'd finally find a place.

Will sadly nodded and placed the books down. "How are we getting to Eight?"

"Bus." Mike said. "Nancy told me how to catch one, just in case."

"Catch?" Will looked worried.

"Not like that, come on." Mike smiled.

"Okay, Mike."

Mike hesitated, then took a deep breath and said, "My name's Teddy. Let's go with that."

"Teddy." Will flinched as he said it, but nodded a little.

The other boy held out his hand, and they left the treehouse behind.

Max was still screaming.

The world was a blur around El as the scientists dragged Max onto a stretcher and into a truck, and shoved her into a car with the teens as they were driven to the Lab. El could barely process what was going on as they were led inside, and Nancy was separated from the others for a "cleanup". All El could focus on was Max's cries as she was rolled into the hospital, with a breather over her mouth and wires strapped to her. El, Steve and Jonathan were following her- what else could they do?- and El finally started talking a few hallways down.

"Max, Max, please just hold on!" she started to cry. "They're trying to help, I- I think?" She looked up at one of the doctors. "Are you trying to help?"

Max was dragged into a hospital room, and into a bed as she continued to sob, and the doctors started talking to each other, throwing around technicals and big words and instructions. El started crying, too, dropping beside Max's bed as Steve and Jonathan started arguing with some guy by the door.

"Tell me where it hurts, Max." said a woman above them.



El managed to hear Max scream something like “All over! *All over!*”

“She said she’s burning.” said one doctor, and El thought he might be Dr. Owens, but she wasn’t sure, she wasn’t *sure*. “Check for burns.”

Max’s shirt was removed, but she had no burns. The doctors glanced at each other, confusion written all over their faces. Yeah, like *that* was something that would comfort El at the moment. “Where does it hurt the most, Max?”

Max started screaming, trying to jump up, her voice breaking. “Everywhere! *Everywhere!*”

Someone stuck a syringe in her arm, and after a minute, Max passed out.

“What did you do?” El said, looking up at them. “What did you *do?*”

Owens looked down at her. “Come with us, El, come with us-”

“No! No, I’m staying with her, *no!*” El screamed, as a doctor grabbed her by the arms and started dragging her away. “Let me stay with her, *let me stay with her!* Let me go!”

Joyce was waiting by the phone again. Hopper stood beside her, and she looked up at him. “There’s still no answer.” she said. “Is there something wrong with my phone, or are my boys-”

“Let me try my house again. Maybe they went there.” Hopper suggested, grabbing the phone. “Why don’t you go see if Murray’s finished the tapes yet?”

“You want *me* to talk to him?” Joyce asked as Hopper started dialing. “He’s brilliant, Hop, but he’s annoying as hell.”

“What did I tell you?” Hopper sighed, as the phone rung. And rung. And rung.

After a minute, Hopper said, “Nobody’s answering.”

Joyce shook a little. “Oh, my God. Oh my God, we have to go back. We have to find out what’s wrong.”

Hopper nodded. He had a *sick* feeling. If El and Max were in some kind of trouble, he *had* to get to them. Especially after what had happened to Max before they left.

Good Lord, he shouldn’t have left them alone.

“Lucas, we have to go.”

Lucas looked up at Dustin. “What?”

Dustin was peering through the window, having heard a car pull up and looking to see if it was Steve. He looked back to Lucas, a panic in his eyes. “It’s the Vans.”

Lucas stared at him in horror, then said, “There’s an open window out back. Let’s hurry.”

Dustin nodded. As they ran, Lucas asked, “El? Steve?”

“If the Lab knows where we are, they probably got them.” Dustin said, as they reached the window and he pushed it open.

“We have to get them out!” Lucas yelled.

“Lucas, they’re not like us. They won’t hurt them.” Dustin assured him, already climbing out. “We need to focus on why we came. We have to kill the Monster before it can get to the town.”

“Dustin...” Lucas said cautiously, as he started to follow him outside. “If we change a Vision...”

“We don’t know.” Dustin said again. “We still don’t know if that’s right.”

They looked at each other with a sadness, and then Dustin said, “It’s take a chance on this, or let the town die.”

Lucas sighed. “We find the Monster, and then we find El and the others.”

Dustin nodded, and then they ran.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey guys! We're officially halfway through the fic! :D

## 23. Something Wrong

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

#### *Something Wrong*

“It did something to her.” El said, staring down at her feet.

She was standing at the head of a long table, with a lot of men staring at her as she did. Jonathan and Steve were leaning against the wall, waiting for them to be allowed out to see Max. They’d been brought in for information, and could leave once they’d been debriefed on... on *whatever* was going on.

“And these... now-memories, as you call them, how long has she been experiencing them?” asked one of the men.

“I told you, since that *thing* got to her.” El said, glaring up at them.

“So, why wasn’t she brought in?”

“You’re asking *me*?” El hissed. “You dipshits wouldn’t even let me in, would you? After all that shit I pulled with your little science experiments? That’s what they were to you, right?”

“Ms. Hopper-”

“No, no, *I’m* talking to you!” El yelled. “Don’t think that you’re blameless for what happened to those boys, and don’t think you’re blameless for what happened to Max! You said nothing was wrong, you told her it was flashbacks or hallucinations and you did *nothing*! She’s been telling you over and over that something was wrong and you did *nothing*!”

“Ms. Hopper,” said another man. “We just need you to-”

“What?” El shouted. “Stay calm? Trust you? Look where that got us!”

“Ms. Hopper, we are treating your friend as we speak.”

El gave them a sharp look. "Treating her for *what*?"

Nobody responded.

"What's *wrong* with her?" El shouted. "What is *wrong* with Max?"

"El." she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to see Jonathan.

"El. Let's just go see her, okay?"

"No, no, I want to know what's wrong." El said.

"El." Jonathan said again, as Steve walked up to join them. "Go sit with her. We'll talk with them."

El gave him a glare. "Good luck." she hissed, and she pushed away and left, slamming the door behind her.

Nancy came into Max's room a lot later than the others, dressed in hospital scrubs. The girls were both asleep by this point, but Jonathan and Steve ran over to make sure she was okay.

"Yeah, I'm fine, don't worry." she waved them off. "How's Max?"

The boys glanced to each other. "Not great." Jonathan finally said.

Nancy sighed. "I should've..."

"Hey, hey, it wasn't your fault." Jonathan said, reaching out to grab her hand. "It wasn't your fault."

Nancy bit her lip, before glancing to Steve, who'd stepped back a little. She released Jonathan's hand, before saying, "Uh, they showed me... Owens showed me... the Gate."

They both stiffened. "It's still there?" Steve asked.

Nancy nodded. "And it's spreading. They can't burn it because... because there's a complication." she glanced to Max, and jumped.

The girl had opened her eyes, and was slowly trying to sit up. "Hey!" she said, running to the edge of the bed. "Hey, how's it going? How

are you feeling?”

Max looked at her blankly, as Steve shook El awake. She sat up and said, “Max?”

The redhead looked to her. “El. What did I do this time?”

“Are you feeling alright?” Nancy asked. “How are you?”

Max turned back to her, her face once again blank. “El, who is that?”

Nancy paused, feeling suddenly very cold, as El said, “It’s Nance, Max. Nancy’s alright! Nancy and Jonathan and Steve.”

Max considered, turning back to Nancy. “Are you a... doctor?”

*Shit.*

“What the *hell*?”

Hopper wasn’t sure what he had expected to see when he walked into his house, but it certainly wasn’t *this*.

They’d driven all night and stopped at Joyce’s house first, as the sun rose above the forest. Not only was Jonathan not there, but Will was gone, the window open. Joyce had *not* taken that well, and was about ten seconds away from running into the woods to find him before Hopper convinced her to check his house first.

“He’s probably fine, Joyce.” he said. “He’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

But now they’d walked in, and there were drawings all over the walls, taped together into a long, connected line.

“What happened while we were gone?” Joyce asked in horror.

Hopper had sincerely hoped that El and Max would have called him if there was something major going on, but apparently some shit had gone down while he and Joyce were with Murray.

“El?” he called, moving between the rooms. “Max?”

He stopped, staring at something on the floor. He bent down, picking it up, and staring. "Joyce? Joyce, does Jonathan have a polaroid?"

"What?" Joyce said, walking up to him. "What, no. Hopper, what's-"

Hopper showed her what he'd found on the floor- a polaroid photo of part of the picture puzzle. "Someone else was here." he said.

Joyce stared in horror. "Oh, Lord."

Owens shone a flashlight in Max's eyes, checking for something, before putting it away and asking, "Do you know your name?"

"Max." she responded.

"Your full name?"

"Maxine Mayfield."

"Do you know who I am?"

Max stared at him. "A doctor."

"Have we met before?"

She shut her eyes, turning away. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember me?"

She shook her head, looking around at the room. More doctors had come, and were watching her as if she was some kind of specimen. Then there were the other people she was supposed to know.

"Do you know her?"

Max slowly turned, staring at the girl in front of her. After a second, she said, "My sister. El."

El smiled, and Max asked, "Is Dad here?"

The people glanced at each other, and El said, "Your Dad's in

California.”

“No.” Max said. “No, our Dad.”

El looked panicked, and turned to the others. One of them finally said something, changing the subject.

“Do you remember me, now?” asked the girl named Nancy, and after Max shook her head, she said, “They say that you helped save me last night. Do you... do you remember that?”

Max shook her head again.

“Do you remember anything about last night?” asked Owens, and Max turned to him, a glare forming. “About what happened?”

“I remember they hurt me.” Max said darkly.

El turned away, and Owens asked, “The doctors?”

“No.” Max said. “The soldiers.”

“The soldiers?”

“They shouldn’t have done that.” a threat was rising in Max’s voice, and even she didn’t know what the threat was. “It upset him.”

“Him?”

Owens pulled a picture out, and Max looked down at a photo of a sketch, a sketch that she didn’t recognize. “Is this him?”

She didn’t recognize the sketch, but she recognized who was in it. The monster with a face but no eyes. She nodded.

“Where did you get that?” El asked, as Owens stood up.

“It was in the Byers House.”

El looked panicked, and the boy named Jonathan asked, “Wh-why were you in my house?”

“Something got in, but it apparently got out, too, because the house



was empty when we got there.”

“*Empty?*” both Jonathan and El shouted.

Owens gave them an odd look. “I’m sure your Mother is fine, Jonathan. Now, I have an idea. We’re going to try something, and I think it will help us understand what’s going on.”

Jonathan and El shared a look, and Jonathan said, “I- I need to go.”

“You can’t leave yet.” another doctor told him. “Not until we’re done.”

A table was wheeled in, then, with something inside a case. Max glared at it, and saw what looked like part of the Tunnel Vines, like a Worm. A man in a lab coat stood above it, and turned a blowtorch on. Max’s stomach clenched in horror- a horror that didn’t reach her blank expression- as he lowered the flame towards the Worm.

The worm let out a screech, and Max looked away.

“Do you feel anything?” Owens asked.

“A little sting.” Max replied.

“It stings, where?”

The fire was lowered more, the worm screeched more, and Max felt more pain. “My chest.” she managed to get out, and reached up to touch her chest as it started to burn.

The fire lowered more.

“It burns! It burns!” Max screamed, starting to jerk. “It *burns!* It *burns!*”

“Where?”

“*Everywhere!*” she was too hot, she was on fire, she could barely think enough to talk.

She barely heard El start to scream at the doctors, barely saw Nancy

rush forwards and hit the man with the blowtorch on the shoulder, causing him to raise the fire away, but suddenly she felt better. The fire left, and she was alright. For now.

“Are you okay?” El asked, grabbing her arm. “Are you okay?”

Max didn’t answer.

## 24. Virus

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

#### *Virus*

“A virus?” El asked.

Apparently, the teenagers were supposed to leave her in the dark about this, but none of them really felt like listening to the Lab workers at this point. They were all standing in the hall, glancing around occasionally to make sure that nobody was listening in.

“Like... like the Shadow Monster infected her.” Steve said, glancing towards the door that led to Max’s room. “And it’s spreading.”

“And what happens as it spreads? It... takes her over?” El asked.

The boys glanced at each other.

“How do we stop it?”

“They don’t know.” Jonathan said.

El bit her lip, and said, “I’m going back to her. Where’s Nancy?”

“Bathroom, I think.” Steve sighed. “I... I’ll wait with you. Jonathan, you want to wait for Nancy?”

“I...” Jonathan paused, looking confused.

Steve didn’t say anything, instead going into Max’s room. El gave Jonathan a quick look before following.

Nancy was sitting outside.

They told her that she could go outside so long as she didn’t leave the fenced-in area. She told them she just needed fresh air. She’d lied.

She sat in the grass, and reached into her bag, which had been searched and cleaned. But they left her the walkie-talkie. The walkie-talkie that El gave her when she started tutoring her, the one that she'd used to talk to her last year.

There was one more walkie-talkie, one she'd swiped from the Police Office. She wasn't sure if Hopper knew she'd taken it, but if he did, he didn't care, and that was all that mattered. And it rested on a shelf in her treehouse.

"Hey, it's me." she said. There wasn't a response. Of course there wasn't. She'd basically left him alone for two days. He wouldn't want to talk to her.

"Listen," she sighed. "I've been gone a long time, and, well, I just want you to know that it's not about you. It's not your fault, it's not because we fought. Okay, there was... there was a different problem, and I'm fixing it. I'm gonna fix it, and that's all I can say right now. I just..."

She took a breath, trying to figure out what to say, what to say to the kid that she wanted to protect, that she wanted to keep safe, that she'd grown to care about over the last year. She cared about him more than she'd admit to herself.

"I'm not mad at you." she said. "You have... you have every right to be pissed at me, and I'll make it right when I get back. I just... I don't want you to get hurt. I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt and I couldn't do anything. I... I don't want to lose you."

She *couldn't* lose him. Not after all this. She didn't know if she could keep going if he wasn't there to tell her about the new romance book he'd read, about how excited he was to learn new words, to ask her how the world worked and how everyone was and to tell her how safe he felt when they were together.

"I know you don't have much food there." she sighed. "You've probably got some candy left, just eat that til I get back. If you run out, there's still some money in the flower pot if you want to go to the store. Just be careful, don't tell anyone where you live or who you are. And... and know that I'll be home soon. I'm coming home

soon, I'll come back to you."

She stopped there, and looked up as the door opened and Jonathan peered out. Nancy sighed and put the walkie-talkie back in her bag, standing up and walking over.

"The... the doctors said you were out here. Are you okay?" he asked.

Nancy nodded, forcing a smile onto her face. "Just... wanted some air."

She smiled and walked inside, almost instinctively grabbing his hand as they walked down the hall.

"What the hell is taking so long?" El asked.

They were all sitting around Max, who didn't do much but stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore them.

"Doctors always take forever." Steve shrugged.

They looked at each other again, and then Nancy said, "Screw it." She stood up and left, throwing the door open as she did. Steve and Jonathan glanced at each other before following. El looked at them, prepared to follow, but... no, she had to stay with Max.

But she could see them down the hall, as the door was left open. Nancy was trying to push past the guards towards the elevator, screaming, "Let me in! Let me through!"

"We can't do that." one of the guards said. "He'll be out in a minute."

"Nancy, hold on-" Steve said.

"You said that an hour ago!" Nancy yelled. "What's going on? Let me in!"

El watched the fight, enraptured by it. She didn't notice Max look down at it, too, staring in a dark interest.

After a second, El glanced at her and saw her, and said, “Max? You okay?”

Max jumped, and turned to her. She took a deep breath, then said in a flat voice, “I saw something.”

“Something?” El asked.

Max nodded. She leaned over, and whispered, “The Shadow Monster.”

El’s eyes widened.

“I think I know how to stop him.”

People at the grocery store were staring at them. Lucas expected that. After all, they were two boys with no adults, grabbing armfuls of meat and walking off with them.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Dustin whispered.

Lucas nodded. “Mike did this last year. He just said to distract them and walk out.”

“Distract?” Dustin asked.

Lucas paused as they approached the door, shutting his eyes. When he opened them, there was no light around them, and everyone was gasping and screaming and complaining.

“Like that.” Lucas said. “The light will be back in a minute. Let’s go.”

“Which way?” Dustin asked.

Lucas sighed. “Just go straight. Doors are this way.”

As they walked out, Dustin said, “Are we really doing this?”

“Of course.” Lucas nodded. “Let’s catch ourselves a Monster.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

So, uh, yeah, tomorrow's chapter is gonna be GREAT. Lots of crap going down.

BTW, I've kinda started working on another fic to start publishing after this fic is done. It may-or-may-not involve a vigilante AU and may-or-may-not end in an eventual "It" crossover. Also may-or-may not be really effing long lol.

Also, sorry this chapter was a bit short. It's cause tomorrow's chapter is pretty dang long.

## 25. The Spy

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

#### *The Spy*

Max had been given a map of the tunnels, and she'd pointed at one spot. "He's hiding something from me," she said simply. "Something important."

So men were sent into the tunnels, and Nancy practically forced her way into the room with the other doctors, wanting to see what would happen to them, what they'd find. Steve, Jonathan and El opted instead to wait with Max, who went back to the Hospital Bed and stared at nothing for a long while.

They waited for what felt like forever, and El had tried and failed to fall asleep again. She had no idea what the Men were doing, what was going to happen, what the Shadow Monster could be hiding from them.

*She had no idea.*

The boys were waiting in a bus.

The junkyard was dark and cold and boring, and they were sitting around and waiting for *hours*.

"Do we have the weapon?" Dustin asked for the millionth time.

Lucas nodded, pointing to the floor, where they'd laid an array of knives. Their original plan was to use his Shards, but they didn't work as well when there was no sunlight around to help charge them. They also had stolen matches from the Library a long while ago; Dustin had said that setting anything on fire would certainly hurt, if not kill anything, so that was their backup plan.



Dustin sighed and sat next to him, staring out the window. Eventually, he said, "I... I can force a vision."

"No." Lucas said. "No, you hate that. We can keep waiting."

"I want to." Dustin said, grabbing Lucas's hand. "I want to try and see something."

Lucas bit his lip, then nodded. "Be careful."

Dustin smiled at him, then let go and sat on the floor. He put his hands together and started to steady his breathing, shutting his eyes tight.

Lucas hadn't actually seen him try and force a vision before, but he'd described it to him. He was supposed to stay close to himself, and breathe slowly, and focus only on the future. He was supposed to think only about one thing, and concentrate. Dustin hated that; he liked to think about a lot of things, and he hated sitting still. He'd often failed to force a vision before, and that got him punished. He hated that even more.

They'd both had shitty lives in the Lab. Dustin had been made to have visions whenever he could, and Lucas had been forced to test his Light Powers all the time. Lucas had discovered his Shards while practicing with the boys while the cameras were being "repaired"-Dustin could sometimes see when they would have what he designated "free time"- and he'd begged them not to tell the Bad Men. At first, it had been because it had tired Lucas out and he didn't want them to keep on forcing the power, but then it had been because he didn't want them to be able to weaponize him. He knew that was what they were planning; he'd heard them talking about Mike- then Eleven- and he knew what they wanted him for. He knew what they wanted *all* of them for.

He'd tried to escape twice before he'd reached the other boys. He'd just waited until the Bad Men let him walk on his own- when they didn't have their arms around him or had him trapped in a room- and then he'd turn the lights off and run. But he'd been caught both times, and punished a lot, and then the second time he'd been taken to Hawkins. He considered that the best thing those bastards at the

Lab ever did; if nothing else, they brought him to his Brothers.

He looked out the window, and he heard the screech.

“Dustin.” he said, turning back to the boy. “Dustin, it’s here.”

Dustin didn’t respond, and his nose was bleeding.

Lucas took a deep breath, then dropped to the floor and grabbed the sharpest of the knives, looking back out the window. The Monster had arrived, and was sniffing at the meat that led to the bus. It wasn’t coming closer. Why wasn’t it coming closer?

Lucas sighed. “Shit.” He slowly walked to the door and pushed it open. The Monster raised its head and watched as he approached.

“Hey.” Lucas said, still holding the knife in his hand. “Nice Monster.”

It kept staring at him- at least, he thought it was. It didn’t have *eyes*, so it wasn’t like he could tell.

Yes, it was definitely a baby Demogorgon. He could see the flower-shaped face, even in the low light. He wondered exactly what he was gonna do if he couldn’t kill it with the knife. He could probably distract it for a bit until Dustin arrived with the Matches, and then they could try-

He heard a snap behind him, and whipped around.

Oh, *shit*.

Another baby Demogorgon was running towards him.

The first Demogorgon started charging, too, so Lucas dropped the knife and held out both hands; once the monsters jumped, they were both knocked back by his shield. He was probably safe within a two-foot radius for now, more if he kept using both hands, but it was hard to keep track of two at once.

He heard another roar, and turned around to see a third Demogorgon step out from behind a pile of garbage, hissing.

*Oh, seriously?* Lucas thought. *That's a little excessive.*

He tried to spot an escape, but the Demogorgons were approaching quickly. Maybe if he could duck and throw his hands over his head, he could shield himself for a while, but then what would he do?

“Hey, assholes!”

Lucas whipped around, to see Dustin rush out of the trailer. “Dustin, wait!” Lucas yelled, but the other boy completely ignored him and slid to a stop only a few feet away.

“Eat shit!” Dustin yelled, and pulled something out of his pocket. Within seconds, he’d lit a match and thrown it to the ground. Fire lit up across the floor, and the Demogorgons all screeched and backed up. Lucas had enough time to rush over to Dustin’s side before the monsters started to recover, moving away from the flames.

“You okay?” Dustin asked.

“Are you?”

“Of course I’m okay, I’m not the one who decided to take on three Monsters on my own.”

“You were busy.”

The boys turned back to the Monsters, and Dustin tossed Lucas a matchbox. “Burn them.”

However, the Demogorgons stopped before reaching a good distance, pausing and looking up at the sky. And, in an instant, they turned and rushed away.

“Where are they going?” Lucas asked, confused.

“They’re going to the Lab.”

Lucas froze, trying to process what he’d said. He slowly turned to his brother, asking in a shaking voice, “What?”

“I saw...” Dustin paused. “I saw fire, and the Lab, and...”

“And?”

Dustin took a deep breath. “A girl, with purple hair. But she wasn’t *there*, she was somewhere else, with... it’s not important. If El and the Others are at the Lab...”

“Then the Demogorgons are going for them.” Lucas finished. They stared at each other for a second, and then Lucas said, “We have to go.”

Nancy looked over the shoulders of the doctors as they studied the computers, which broadcasted not only their mens’ location, but a live video from cameras in their helmets. The men were staring at dark tunnels for most of it, and it was honestly starting to bore her, until one looked down and saw a snapped hairbrush, only barely visible above the vines.

“That’s mine.” Nancy said.

“What?” Owens asked.

“I was there. That’s where the boys found me.” Nancy said, eyes widening. “That place is a graveyard.”

The men shone lights on skeletons and bones, and one finally said, “There’s nothing here.”

“Looks like your kid’s full of shit, doc.” said one of the men, and Nancy felt a sudden urge to slap him. From the look on Owens’ face, he wanted to do the same.

That was when a screech sounded over the computer speakers.

And when the cameras and trackers on the men started disappearing.

El was still waiting, when she heard Max say, very quietly, “I’m sorry.”

She turned around, confused. Jonathan and Steve also looked over, and they all saw Max start to tear up. “What?”

Max looked over at El, her voice breaking. “He made me do it.”

El stared at her, the wheels of her mind turning. Steve was the first to speak, moving closer to her and asking, “What? Max, who made you do what?”

“I told you.” Max’s voice was somehow both sad and angry at the same time, turning to give the boys a dark look. “They upset him. They shouldn’t have done that. They shouldn’t have upset him.”

Max was crying, then, and it suddenly hit El what was going on.

“It’s a trap.” she said quietly, and then she jumped to her feet and started to run.

She had almost reached the doors that led to the stairwell when the guards grabbed her, pushing her away. “You can’t go in there!”

“It’s a *trap*!” El screamed, trying to push past them. “I have to warn them, it’s a trap! *It’s a trap!*”

The blinking lights that showed the location of the Men were gone. But more lights were coming. Coming closer.

“What just happened?” Nancy asked. “What *happened*?”

Nobody answered her. Before she could ask again, she heard something approaching. She turned her head and started walking towards the window that made up the fourth wall, staring outside at the hole that led to the Gate.

A Demogorgon shot out of it.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Well, I hope you guys enjoy cliffhangers, and I REALLY hope you enjoyed "The Lost Sister", because

you're about to get about a week straight of it. Sorry  
bout that, that's how long it takes to get through it  
all, along with the... additions I made...

## 26. Kali

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so I did make some changes, the main change should be pretty obvious, and I'm going to ask you to please trust me. You'll see why I made the "addition" quite soon...

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

#### *Kali*

The boys climbed off the bus, staring around at everything. Chicago was big, and bright, and *loud*.

Once the bus drove away, Will grabbed onto Teddy's arm, gripping it and whimpering a little.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you." Teddy said, looking ahead at the lights as a smile formed on his face. The city looked really pretty.

As he thought this, a man ran into him, knocking the two boys to the side. "Watch where you're going!" he yelled back at them as he kept walking away.

"Mouthbreather." Teddy hissed, before turning back around. "Come on, let's go find Eight."

They had to leave the bright lights and crowds of people behind, but they didn't get an improvement in term of comfort. The two boys wandered through a dark alley, with people shooting them long, creepy looks and scary noises coming from somewhere nearby. Will kept clutching onto Teddy's arm, trying to hide behind him and be as invisible as possible.

They finally reached an empty street, with graffiti sprayed across the

walls, and Teddy caught a glimpse of a flicker of light in the window of a building up ahead. He squeezed Will's hand quickly, then they walked inside.

Somebody was talking as they walked in, but they didn't see anybody at first. Teddy shut the door behind them before moving forwards, and the boys finally spotted a group of people ahead, surrounding a fire inside a garbage can.

They looked dirty and beat-up, but didn't seem sad. A girl with wild hair was laughing at something a guy with a mohawk was saying. A tall, muscled man was throwing paper into the fire, smirking and saying something to the others, while a woman in a jacket sat on a stool, tapping the side and talking. A short girl sat underneath her, twirling a pocketknife in her hands.

Will seemed freaked out, and stopped in his tracks. After failing to make him move, Teddy simply called out, "Hello?"

They all turned to stare at them: most of them looked surprised, though the girl in the jacket also looked a little scared. The Mohawk-Man smirked and walked closer, passing over the rest of the group. "Well, well," he said. "What do we have here?"

"What are you *wearing*? It's shit!" the short girl asked, as the Jacket-Girl kicked her to shut her up.

Teddy looked down at their clothes. He was wearing a jacket that Nancy had smuggled him, as well as a sweater and pants that she'd stolen from El's attic. Will was wearing a faded t-shirt with some extra-long jeans. If anything, the others were dressed weird; all in dark colors, with spikes and points, and with hairstyles that he hadn't seen before; the short girl's hair faded to a brighter color towards the bottom, and the man's mohawk was rainbow-colored.

The Jacket-Girl stood up and followed the Mohawk-Man, glancing between them. "What is that, a sweater?"

"There aren't any cows to milk here, boys." The Crazy-Hair Girl said, standing up and joining the others; Will started whimpering again, moving to stand behind Teddy. "Go on back to the farm now."



Farm? They came from Hawkins, not a farm. "We're looking for our sister." Teddy said simply, glancing in confusion as the Mohawk-Man circled them, before stopping in front of them again. All the people were surrounding them now, even the short girl, who turned up her nose at their appearance.

"Aww, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn lost their sister." Mohawk-Man laughed. "So sad."

"I saw her." Teddy said, using his free hand to reach into his pocket. "Here."

"Whoa!" the tall man said, stepping forwards, and Teddy suddenly realized that he had a threatening look directed at them. "Hand out of pocket. Slow."

It didn't matter; Teddy had found what he needed, anyway. He pulled the photo out, handing it to the short girl, who happened to be closest to him. It was the photo from the newspaper clipping of Eight, and the girl stared at it in confusion. "Who the hell is this?"

The Jacket-Girl took the photo, and Teddy was pleased to see a spark of recognition in her eyes, though it was quickly replaced by bewilderment. "Is that Kali?"

"Kali." Teddy nodded, not noticing Will start to shake behind him. "Kali Prasad. It said-"

"Gimme that shit." Mohawk-Man said, taking the photo and looking it over. He looked up at the boys, and Mike noticed that he looked *angry*. "How did you find us? Who else knows you're here?"

"No one." Teddy said, as Will shook his head behind him.

"So, what, then?" Mohawk-Man came a bit closer. "Poof! You just show up, like magic? With that picture?"

"Stay calm!" said Jacket-Girl, reaching forwards. "They're just kids."

"Kids who have a picture of Kal before she was cool." the short girl rolled her eyes.

“Shut up, Wilder, the adults are talking.” Mohawk-Man snapped. The short girl responded by showing him her middle finger, and he rolled his eyes and turned back to the boys. “These kids could get us all killed!”

Before Teddy could move, the man had a pocket knife pulled out and pointed at them. “If I have to ask you again, kid, you’re gonna start losing things, starting with those pretty little locks of yours, get it?”

Teddy stepped back, as Will gripped his arm again. He spared a glance at his friend, noticing that his nose was trickling blood. He wondered what colors he was seeing. From the look on Will’s face, it wasn’t good.

“Come on, Axe!” Jacket-Girl started to walk forwards. “Put down the knife!”

“How did you *find us*?” Mohawk-Man said again.

“I saw her!” Teddy replied, not really sure what else to say.

“*That’s not an answer!*” Axe said, reaching forwards and grabbing Teddy’s shoulder. Teddy froze up, prepared to push the knife away, but then the Mohawk-Man stopped, staring at his arm.

In a second, he’d dropped the knife to the ground and started running like mad, screaming, “Get them off! *Get them off!* Shit! *Shit!*”

Then, they all heard a voice. “You’re a terrible dancer, Axel.”

They turned to the side, where a girl stood, halfway down the staircase. Teddy took in a deep breath, instantly recognizing her by the wild purple hair he’d seen in the Mind Place, and by the face he’d seen in the clipping.

Eight.

*Kali.*

“I told you, stay out of my head!” Axel yelled, incredibly pissed off.

Wilder started laughing, grinning brightly. “Nice one, Kal! Do it

again!”

“Since when was threatening little boys part of our routine?” Kali asked, getting off the stairs and walking forwards, glancing towards the Jacket-Girl and Wilder specifically.

“They know about you!” Jacket-Girl said first.

“They had *this*.” said Crazy-Hair, and she passed Kali the photo.

Kali stared at it for a second, not a single emotion showing on her face, and then she walked closer towards the boys. Teddy glanced at Will, who was staring at her in a mixture of bewilderment and relief. She showed them the photo briefly, before pocketing it and asking, “Where did you get this?”

Teddy paused, before gesturing to Will and saying, “His Mother.”

Kali turned to him, her eyes flickering briefly to his nosebleed, before apparently shrugging it off and asking, “Your Mother gave this to you?”

“She doesn’t know.” Teddy said. “She’s out of town.”

“Wonderful, so Tom and Huck ran away from home.” Axel said, walking towards his pocketknife on the ground. “How long do you bet they’ll last?”

“They said they’re looking for their sister.” Jacket-Girl said.

“Well, they can find her somewhere else.”

Axel reached down for the knife, and with a tilt of his head, Teddy summoned it to him instead, catching it in his free hand. He heard gasps from behind him, and Crazy-Hair said some sort of curse.

Kali looked from the knife to him, a realization dawning in her eyes.

“I saw you.” Teddy said, taking the knife and closing it, before passing it back to her. “In the Mind Place. Will saw you in the Rainbow Room.”

Kali stepped closer to them, and after a second, Will released his friend, coming closer to her, a relief showing in his eyes. "What are your names?" Kali asked, looking between them.

Will didn't say anything, and it took the other boy a second to think before responding. "T-Teddy. This is Will."

Kali gave them a look, and Teddy realized that wasn't what she meant.

She reached down to Will's arm, flipping it over to see the *012* tattoo on his wrist. She stared for a second, then turned to Teddy, another spark of recognition in her eyes. She grabbed his wrist, too, and had to push the jacket sleeve away to see the *011*.

After a second, Teddy pushed her glove away, to see the *008*.

The three stared at each other for a long while, before Teddy said, "Sister."

Kali stared at them, before saying, "Brothers."

Then she reached forwards and hugged them to her.

"So, you never made it back to the Rainbow Room?" Kali asked.

The three were sitting on the rooftop now; Kali had told her group that she wanted to be alone with her Brothers for a bit. Will nodded; he had been nonverbal all day, but thankfully, Teddy had been able to explain enough.

Kali turned to him, then, and asked, "And you... you have no memory of me?"

Teddy shook his head. "Should I?"

Kali paused, before saying, "I suppose not. And how long have you been with your... your Nancy?"

"Three hundred and twenty-seven days." Teddy replied, then he

gestured to Will. “He’s had his Mom and Brother for three hundred and fifty-three.”

“And these people,” Kali asked, “They think they can do something to these men to set your free?”

Will nodded. He tapped into the chair, a quick ● ● ● - - - - - ●, and Teddy had to translate. “Soon.”

“They’re naive, then.” Kali said. “We will always be monsters to *them*, do you understand?”

Teddy nodded, but Will remained silent, glancing to the ground. “Let me guess,” Kali said, “Your Nancy, your Mother, they stop you from using your gifts?”

While Teddy nodded again, Will shook his head. Kali glanced to Will and said, “You’re the lucky one, then. Your Mother recognizes that we can do incredible things. It makes us very special.”

“What’s your gift?” Teddy asked. “Will says you made fire.”

Kali chuckled. “That was a bad example, but unfortunately the only one that Will has witnessed. I was young and inexperienced, then.” She turned back to Teddy. “I can make people see, or not see, whatever I choose.”

“Is that how you made the man with the rainbow hair dance?” Teddy asked.

Kali laughed. “Axel is not so fond of spiders, so...”

“You made him see spiders?” Teddy asked, smiling. He liked spiders fine, they were kind of cute, but Nancy really hated them.

“Yes. But it doesn’t have to be scary.” Kali smiled. “Watch.”

She opened her hand, and inside was a bright blue butterfly. Teddy and Will stared, transfixed, as its wings flashed rainbow colors. “This Butterfly,” Kali explained as if flew into the air, “It isn’t real. But I’ve convinced your mind that it is. Think of it as a kind of magic.”

Teddy stared at the butterfly, eyes wide, as Will reached forwards and tried to catch it; his hand passed right through it. Kali reached up and closed her hand around it, then opened it to reveal nothing.

“Are you real?” Teddy asked, after a second.

“Yes, I’m real.” Kali assured him.

After a second, Will reached forwards and poked her, giggling. Kali laughed, and Teddy poked her, too, and soon all three of them were laughing on the rooftop.

Kali let them sleep in her room, setting them up in a bed with extra blankets. She smiled at them, but Teddy realized quite quickly that she was crying. “Sad?” he asked.

“Not sad.” she shook her head. “I just... feel whole now. Like a piece of me was missing... and now it’s not. Does that make sense?”

Will and Teddy nodded.

“I think your dreams...” Kali said, turning to Will, “I think you dreamed about me for a reason. I think we belong together.”

The boys both smiled at that.

Kali paused, then asked, “Our other brothers, have you... do you know where they are?”

Will shook his head, and Teddy said, “I could find them. I just need a blindfold, but... if we’re all together, won’t we be in danger? From the Bad Men.”

Kali reached out, grabbing his hand, and grabbed Will’s with her other. “Quite the contrary. Together, we’re so much stronger than them. We can all be here, together. Home.”

“Home.” Teddy repeated, smiling.

Kali left after that, telling them to get some sleep. After she departed,

Teddy turned to Will. "Are you alright?"

Will nodded, curling up and hugging his knees.

"Did you..." Teddy hesitated, then asked, "What were their lights like?"

After a long silence, Will whispered, "I don't *know*."

"Don't know?" That surprised him. "How do you not know?"

"Changing." Will shivered. "The people she were with looked kind-of red when they were angry at us, but... when the girl with the jacket stood up for us, and when they talked to Kali, their colors changed. They faded from red to blue to purple. Mostly purples."

"Purple? Has anyone ever had purple before?"

Will shrugged. "Kali has a dark blue. But it gets redder when she talks about the Bad Place. Are... are my powers broken?"

Teddy shook his head. "Maybe you're just tired. Or maybe there are lots of different lights in different places. Maybe some people have green or gold or rainbow."

Will smiled a little. "Can I make my light rainbow? That sounds pretty."

They laughed a little at that, and then settled in to sleep.

## 27. The Gang

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again for your lovely comments everyone! :)

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

#### *The Gang*

A stolen police radio buzzed on the table as Dottie and Funshine played cards. Axel continued to pace across the room, as Mick was sitting on her usual lookout post. Wilder peered over the table, asking, "Can't you deal me in?"

"Maybe when you're old enough to drink." Dottie giggled.

"That's not fair and you know it!" Wilder huffed. "I'm not *that* much younger than Kal-" Axel snorted at that. "-and you let her play!"

"Kali's the leader, we make exceptions for her." Funshine explained. "Why don't you join Mick?"

"Cause I don't want to be *boring*." Wilder huffed. "No offense, Mick."

"What'd you say?" Mick asked, glancing away from the window for a second.

Wilder rolled her eyes and groaned.

At that point, Kali walked in. They barely glanced at her, until Axel spoke first. "How're your white hick brothers? You tuck 'em in real tight?"

Dottie giggled, "Yeah, what about a lullaby? Did you sing them one?"

Mick dropped off her perch to join them, and the two women started singing *Old McDonald*, which made Wilder burst into giggles.



Kali glanced between them, before interrupting with, “Teddy found me with only this.”

She slammed the picture down at the table, and they all glanced at it. Kali continued, “All he needs is an image and a blindfold, and he can find whoever he wants.”

Axel snorted. “You’re telling us that little Huck is some sort of human radar detector or some shit?”

“Or some shit, yes.” Kali rolled her eyes.

“Come *on*!” Axel rolled his eyes. “You can’t be serious!”

“We’ll find out soon enough.” Kali said. “I want to do one. Tomorrow.”

They all reacted fast, jumping up and staring at her. “You serious, Kal?” Axel asked.

“We’re way too hot right now!” Mick said.

“*Paranoid!*” Dottie sung brightly.

“*Realistic!*” Mick yelled back.

“I think Kal is right.” Wilder said.

“No, you don’t, you just want us to let you go on this one.” Funshine said.

Wilder flipped him off, as Mick said, “You don’t kill their men and expect them to look the other way. If they find us, they will unleash hell.”

“So we give into fear?” Kali snapped.

They all glanced at each other, as Kali continued. “They only barely escaped, and they’re lost. They need this.” With finality, she announced, “We go out. Tomorrow.”

She turned to go, and Wilder asked, “So we’re keeping them? Just

cause they can find shit?”

Kali turned around, shooting her a glare. “Because they’re my brothers.”

Wilder didn’t flinch at Kali’s look like the others, but she did glance away, which was her way of admitting that she’d gone too far.

“They’ve been tools long enough.” Kali said. “It’s time for them to learn how to fight back.”

Will woke up in the middle of the night. He was tangled up in blankets, but still felt really cold. Mike- *Teddy*- was asleep next to him, hugging the pillow. Will sat up, rubbing his eyes. He wondered if they had a bathroom here, he should probably use it while he was awake. For a second, he considered just staying where he was: he didn’t want to leave his brother, and Kali’s friends scared him a little. But... well, if he was going to stop being scared of everything, he should probably at least try to wander around for a bit.

He wandered down the stairs, entering the large room. At first, he thought it was empty, and he started to walk across, looking for a door that might lead to a bathroom. He jumped, though, when he felt two hands land on his shoulders, and he was spun around to come face-to-face with Wilder.

“Hey, Sawyer!” she giggled.

She laughed at his panicked expression. “Whoa, chill out, buddy. I didn’t realize you were still awake. I am, I usually sleep in the van while we travel so I stay up pretty late all the time. They make me wait with Mick in the car while everything else goes on! Isn’t that dumb? I’m not a baby! I’m not even that- hey, are you okay?”

Will honestly wasn’t sure if he could follow how fast she talked. Even El took a *breath* sometimes. And this girl had to be... how old was she? She was even shorter than him. While he just stared at her, Wilder continued.

“You don’t talk much, do you? That’s okay, I talk a lot, so you can

just listen to me.”

Will tried to gesture away, and she looked at him in confusion. “What’s that mean?”

He gestured around. “Do you want something? ... do you want food? We ran outta food yesterday... no? Okay, you want Kal? She’s on the roof, I think... oh! Oh, you need to use the restroom?”

Will finally nodded, and Wilder said, “Yeah, we haven’t got one of those. You can climb in the window of the next building over and use theirs, but you’re gonna have to avoid the rats. Or you can piss on the street. No one will care if they don’t see ya.”

He stiffened at the idea of going outside, glancing at the window in a panic. Somehow, Wilder picked up on this, too. “Scared to go out alone?” He nodded a little. “Tha’s alright. I was the same way after Kal picked me up from... well, after she picked me up. Do you want me to go out with you? I won’t look- obviously, I’m not a creep- and I can help with the rats. They’re tricky little buggers but surprisingly easy to hit from a distance.”

Will paused, then nodded.

“Great! I got nothing better to do anyway. Follow me, kid!” she grabbed his hand and dragged him out the door. “Let’s shoot some big mice!”

“Hey, it’s me.”

*Her voice buzzed from the Walkie-Talkie. He wasn’t sure if this was just his dream, or if his unconscious state had found his way into the Mind Place. He wasn’t sure which idea he preferred.*

*“Listen, I’ve been gone a long time, and, well, I just want you to know that it’s not about you. It’s not your fault, it’s not because we fought. Okay, there was... there was a different problem, and I’m fixing it. I’m gonna fix it, and that’s all I can say right now. I just...”*

*He stopped in front of the image of the walkie-talkie, staring at it and*

*wondering whether he could cry in a dream.*

*"I'm not mad at you. You have... you have every right to be pissed at me, and I'll make it right when I get back. I just... I don't want you to get hurt. I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt and I couldn't do anything. I... I don't want to lose you."*

Teddy was shaken awake. He sat up instantly, looking around. "Calm down, Teddy, it's alright!" Kali said. "It's just me."

It really was just her. Which wasn't a good thing.

"Where's Will?" he asked.

"Apparently Wilder imprinted on him last night." Kali snorted. "Don't worry, he's outside. I want you two to meet our friends. Properly."

## 28. The Train

### Notes for the Chapter:

sorry that the chapter's so late today guys... today's a bad Depression day and I kinda forgot... sorry...

keep commenting, I guess. it's always nice to know that people care...

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

#### *The Train*

Kali walked Teddy down the stairs, where her gang was waiting at a long table. Will sat next to Wilder on the floor, and when he saw them, Will jumped up and ran to his brother, smiling and grabbing his hand. Wilder laughed, and called, "What? Was I *that* annoying?"

Kali laughed, though Teddy wasn't sure what was funny.

"That is Wilder." Kali explained. "She's the baby of the group."

"I am *not*, I'm just short." Wilder rolled her eyes. "I'm the fun one."

"You're the annoying little shit who won't shut up." said the Jacket-Girl, rolling her eyes, but there was some humor in her tone.

Axel entered from the other side of the room. "We need money, Kal, I can't keep eating this shit!"

"That's Axel." Kali said.

"The Spider-Hater." Teddy identified.

Kali laughed, and even Axel let out a chuckle. "Yes, the Spider-Hater. This is Dottie, our newest. Like you two, she just left home."

"You mean the Loony Bin!" Axel yelled, and the girl with crazy hair

giggled and nodded at them.

“Mick, our eyes, our protector.” Kali introduced, and the girl with the jacket continued tapping on the table. “This is Funshine, our warrior.”

The tall man came over, and Will gripped Teddy’s hand tighter as he approached. Kali noticed this. “Don’t let his size fool you,” she said. “Fun’s an angel.”

He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, boys.”

Teddy awkwardly took his hand, then flipped it over to look at his wrist; it was blank. “If you’re looking for a number, you won’t find one.” Kali said, and Teddy turned to look at her. She moved to sit in one of the chairs, and continued, “They’re not like us, no, not in that way. But like us, they’re outcasts.”

“Outcasts?” Teddy asked, confused.

“Freaks.” Axel huffed.

“Speak for yourself,” Dottie said.

“Society abandoned us.” Wilder said from the floor. “Hurt us, ditched us, left us to die.” She moved a finger across her throat for dramatic effect.

“We were dead. All of us.” Funshine said. “Kali saved us. Here-” he pointed to his head, and then to his heart. “And here.”

“Don’t get all mushy on us now, Fun.” Kali sighed, as Wilder mimed puking from the floor, glancing up to see if Will found that funny.

“No, not mushy. True.” Funshine smiled.

“She helped us. Now, we help her.” Mick added.

“In this life, kid,” Axel sat up, “You roll over or you fight back.”

“We’re all fighters here.” Mick said.

“Fight?” Teddy asked, glancing between them. “Who?”

Kali and her gang glanced at each other, then stood up, all moving to one side of the table. Will glanced at Teddy, and then they moved to the other side to face them. Kali picked a bag up off the floor and dumped it onto the table, where a bunch of nametags fell out. Teddy inspected them, then felt his skin crawl. He recognized some of those nametags. He’d seen them in the Lab.

“Everyone you see here was in some way responsible for what happened to us.” Kali said as the boys started picking up tags.

Teddy spoke first, looking from one tag to another. “You hurt the Bad Men?”

“No,” Dottie rolled her eyes. “We just... give em a pat on the back.”

“With a bullet.” Wilder said, then mimed shooting herself in the head.

“You kill them?” Teddy asked.

“They’re criminals.” Kali shrugged. “We simply make them pay for their crimes.”

Will paled beside Teddy, grabbing his hand as he paused to breathe in deeply.

“Damn, Sawyer.” Axel smirked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“We can’t all be fighters, I guess.” Dottie shrugged.

“I’m a fighter.” Teddy said, a little too fast. He wanted them to accept him, he wanted to be with someone who cared. But even then, he felt a flash of pain as he thought back to when he’d stared down the Bad Men that threw him into Solitary, or who cornered him and the Boys and *El* in the school. Still, he said, with as much confidence as he could, “I’ve killed.”

Kali looked surprised, and said very slowly, “These men that you killed. Did they... deserve it?”

Teddy hesitated before agreeing. “They hurt me. They hurt *us*.”

Will stiffened beside him, and he briefly remembered the look of horror Will had given him back in the Lab when he... no, no, Will understood. Will had to understand that he’d done what he had to do.

“They still want to hurt you.” Kali said. “To hurt us. We’re just making the first move.”

Teddy nodded, though he was still a little wary, but Will just stared at all the people as if seeing them for the first time.

Kali gestured. “Come.” She turned to go, and after a second, Teddy followed. Will slowly released his arm, and walked a little behind him, glancing back at the others.

After a second, Wilder ran up and said, “Come on, Sawyer. Stick with us!”

Teddy and Will both looked to Kali, who turned back and shrugged. “Will may stay with Wilder if he likes. They won’t be far away.”

After a second, Teddy nodded and turned to go, as Will grabbed Wilder’s hand and let her take him back to the group.

Great. So, now Will didn’t even need him. All he had now was Kali. Maybe he could find a way to help her. And then she’d still want him around.

“I was just like you once.” Kali said, as the two of them walked through the trainyard. “I kept my anger inside. I tried to hide from it, but the pain festered.”

They were walking through something that looked quite like the Junkyard back in Hawkins, but was a bit bigger and had a lot more graffiti. Up ahead was a large railroad car, that they seemed to be walking towards.

“Festered?” Teddy asked.



Kali stopped, turning to him and thinking. "It... spread. Until I finally confronted my pain, and I began to heal."

She started walking again, and they stopped several feet away from the railroad car. "Do you see that train?" she asked. When he nodded, she said, "I want you to draw it to us."

"What?" Teddy looked around, a panic in his eyes. Was she serious? It was huge, and probably very heavy. He couldn't do *that*, could he?

Kali turned to look at him, and said, "You can do it. Go ahead and try."

Teddy bit his lip, and then turned towards the train again. He held out his hand, and focused on the train, trying to get it to move. He heard a low creak, but if the railroad car budged, he didn't see it.

He kept trying for about a minute, and eventually the car started rocking back and forth. It raised from the ground about an inch, and then Teddy couldn't take it anymore, and he dropped it, bending over and putting his hands on his knees, breathing hard. He finally said, "I can't."

"Last night, you told me that you lifted a van once." Kali said.

As Mike wiped his nose, he thought back to the incident. They'd been in the car, and El was driving and panicking, and Lucas and Will were in the backseat and screaming, and they were going to hit the van. So he'd focused on it, and it flew over them. He wasn't entirely sure how he'd done it, but he just remembered that he knew he couldn't let his friends get hurt.

"Yes." he said, standing upright again.

"The Bad Men were trying to take you again." Kali said, recapping what she'd been told. "And that made you angry." Teddy nodded, and she continued, "Good. So, find that anger. Focus on that, not the train, not its wait."

Teddy slowly reached his hand forwards again, staring at the train.

"I want you to find something from your life." Kali said as Teddy

started to shake. “Something that *angers* you.”

He thought back to seeing Max yell at El in the gym, to Nancy ripping his book in half, to his own Mom holding a new baby, a new child that she could raise instead of him. He wondered if she’d even looked for him. He wondered if he wanted to find out.

“Now channel it.” Kali continued, apparently seeing the cold fury in her brother’s eyes.

The train started to move, sliding closer to them. Its weight suddenly didn’t matter, and Teddy could feel the emotions that he’d hidden bubbling over.

“Dig deeper.” his sister prompted. “Your whole life, you’ve been lied to-”

*“I’ll come back by 10:00, and I can bring you a big bag of candy, and I’ll even sleep over here.”*

*“Halfway Happy.”*

The train was moving faster now.

“You’ve been imprisoned-”

*The guards were closing the door, leaving him in Solitary. Nancy was screaming at him from below- “Grow the hell up!”*

The train was almost to them now. It had knocked aside items in its path.

“The Bad Men took away your home, your mother, your *brothers* -”

*“We didn’t even have a name for him, we were just hoping it would come to us.”*

*He was turning towards El as the lights flickered and the monster roared, seeing all of his friends for what might be the last time. “Goodbye.”*

“They took everything from you! They stole your life, Teddy!”

*He'd opened the Gate. He'd touched the Monster and opened the Gate.*

*He was the Monster.*

He screamed, and dropped to his knees. The train stopped only a few feet in front of them, and Mike was barely able to reach up and wipe the blood away.

Then he heard the cheering. He looked up, to see the rest of the Gang; how long had they been watching? Dottie was jumping up and down, whooping. Mick and Funshine were both cheering and smiling, and even Axel looked impressed. Wilder was screaming, "Go, Huck!"

The only one who wasn't cheering was Will. He shot Teddy a smile, but something felt off. Like he was pained behind the smile. Like something was bothering him.

Teddy slowly sat up, and turned around, looking at Kali, who'd kneeled down next to him. She had a bright smile on her face, and she asked, "How do you feel?"

He considered. He felt tired, sure, but he'd also just moved a *bus*. And all the feelings he'd been hiding, that he'd been keeping inside and hiding from the world... well, he suddenly didn't feel so angry anymore.

"Good." he said.

Kali led them to a wall, where photos from newspaper clippings were pinned up. "These are the Bad Men." she said as the group filtered in, pushing Teddy and Will towards the front. "The ones we believe are still alive. Do you know any?"

Teddy looked back and forth, searching for a familiar face. After a second, though, Will reached forwards and grabbed one, staring and shaking. Wilder peered over his shoulder, placing a hand on his arm as she did. "*Ray Carroll*." she read. "You know him?"

Will nodded slowly, showing Kali. She glared down at the image and said, "Yes, I forgot. He hurt you, too."

“Too?” Teddy turned.

A flash of pain showed in Kali’s eyes for a split second, and then she shrugged and handed the photo to him. “The Bad Men like Ray, they know about us. It’s made them hard to track, but... maybe not anymore.”

Teddy nodded, crumpling up the paper.

He was going to help.

## 29. A Little Wilder

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

#### *A Little Wilder*

Teddy threw off the blindfold, ripping the picture in two. “I found him.” Teddy said, wiping his nose on his sleeve and reciting, “Gramercy Apartments, Washington and Bethel.”

Will looked at Wilder in confusion, and she asked, “Where the hell is that?”

Dottie knelt to the floor, pulling out an address book and skimming through. She finally found it, and said, “This is it, right?”

She passed the book up to Kali, who smiled. “Lilburn. Where is that?”

“About an hour east.” Funshine said.

“We don’t even have a new ride!” Mick interjected.

“So we swap plates.” Kali shrugged. “We have plates, right?”

“I’ve got ‘em all in my backpack.” Wilder giggled.

“It’s risky.” Mick shook her head, turning towards the window.

“Where’s the fun if there’s no risk?” Kali asked. “We want to give my brothers a memorable First Day, right?”

“I’m in.” Funshine said. “For Teddy and Will.”

“For the boys and for Kal!” Wilder cheered, standing on her tip-toes so she could throw her arm around Will, who flinched at the touch.

“Yeah, sure, why not?” Axel said.

They all turned towards Mick, who was standing at her perch, glancing out the window. Axel asked, “Mick?”

She sighed, turned to them, and said, "Screw it!"

"Hold still, Sawyer."

Will flinched as Wilder started applying the eyeshadow, giggling at his discomfort. "Gosh, you look like I'm trying to kill you."

"You're not, are you?" Teddy asked; he was sitting on a table a little ways away.

"Not today." Wilder shrugged. "And you're up next, soon as the others get back with your new outfits."

"Our what?" Teddy looked worried.

Wilder laughed. "You'll be fine, kids. I got my makeover, and I survived fine."

"Makeover?" Teddy asked.

Wilder sighed. "When I joined the Gang. Didn't want to get recognized. Kal and Axel taught me how to do makeup and Mick bleached my hair. I know they're probably a bit scary, but they're pretty great people, really."

Teddy paused, before asking, "Why... why did they join Kali?"

Wilder sighed, as she switched to a different makeup brush and started brushing it across Will's face. "Those aren't my stories to tell. Stay a while and they'll tell you themselves eventually."

Teddy smiled, seemingly alright with the idea, but Will glanced away. After a second, Wilder asked, "Hey, Huck, why don't you see what's keeping the others?"

He nodded and rushed out, waving to Will as he did. Once he was gone, Wilder turned to Will and asked, "You're not staying, are you?"

Will looked sadly at her. "It's alright." Wilder shrugged. "Kali'll let you leave so long as you promise to not bring the Cops to us. If you

do, you'll be on our shit list, but I don't think you will. You're too rad to do that to us."

He smiled, and she continued doing whatever she was doing to his face. After a second, she sighed and said, "Kal picked *me* up when I was six."

Will blinked at her, surprised, and she laughed. "I know, I was a baby. When I told Dot, she thought I was kidding for two weeks until Axe finally let her know I wasn't. You probably went through worse shit at that age- I know Kal did- but... yeah, apparently most kids don't join gangs before they can multiply."

He didn't know what to say- or if he even wanted to say anything. Even if he wanted to, she decided to keep talking. "My... my parents were investigating your Lab. They got dragged into the Case pretty soon after Kal escaped. They tried to keep me out of it, but, well, you know how that place works."

Will flinched and nodded. "Well, one day they told me that they were going to the Lab, to try and sneak in and find something, something important and incriminating, and not to open the door for anyone but them. And, well... it was a month later when I ran out of food. They still weren't back."

She sighed, and put the makeup brush down; Will grabbed her hand as she talked. "I was on the streets for a bit, and then Kal found me; she was looking for my parents, to tell them about the Lab, but it was... *super* late for that. She told me I could stay with her until we found my Family, but... I just never left."

"Technically, Axel gave me my name." she added. "Called me 'Laura Ingalls' for a bit. I watched the show with my Mom when she was... and, well, I decided that 'Wilder' worked. Sounds kinda cool outta context."

She took a deep breath and brushed some hair out of her face, then said, "Shit, here I am dumping my life story on you. You're probably not even interested... I should finish your makeup."

Will still didn't say anything as she finished up. "Alright, now go find

the other shithheads and get your Halloween Costume.” she joked, standing up. “I’ll put this crap away. Go have fun, Sawyer.”

He stood up, walking towards the door, and then he stopped. He slowly turned towards her until she caught his eye, and then said, very carefully, “Will.”

She blinked, shocked. “What?”

He pointed to himself. “Will. Not Sawyer.”

It took Wilder a second to process his speech, and then she smiled and laughed. “Alright, Will-not-Sawyer.”

He turned to go, then, and had already placed his hand on the doorknob when he heard a quiet word behind him; so quiet that he only barely heard it.

“Erica.”

He froze, then turned back around. “Sorry?”

She wasn’t looking at him, instead intensely staring down at the makeup kit. “My name. Erica. Erica Sinclair.”

Will smiled, then said, “Erica-not-Wilder.”

She laughed, and Will took a deep breath, then *looked* again. Her light shone around her- when he’d looked before, when he’d first come, it had been wildly swapping between colors, red to purple to blue to every color inbetween. Right now, her light was a steady, sky blue.

As he looked, he realized that the color, and the way it was flickering and moving around her, reminded him of... no, no, no, that couldn't be right.

Will blinked, letting the light disappear again, and waved goodbye as he went to find the others.



“Well, what do you think?” Kali asked.

The boys stared at themselves in the mirror. Their hair had been slicked back, dark makeup applied behind their eyes and on their cheeks. Teddy was wearing a dark shirt and leather jacket and pants, along with tall boots. Will was wearing ripped jeans and tennis shoes, with a slightly-torn white shirt hidden under one of Mick’s old dark-green-almost-black jackets.

“Bitchin’.” Dottie complemented, smirking at the two.

Teddy smiled, reaching up to touch his hair. “Bitchin’.” he repeated.

Will simply nodded, still staring at himself. He liked this look, sure, but it felt strange.

“Alright, then.” Kali said. “It’s time to go.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

XD

## 30. Makeover

### Notes for the Chapter:

hoooo boy this is a long one

### CHAPTER THIRTY

#### *Makeover*

The van was pretty big, but they all were a bit squeezed in. Mick and Axel sat up front, while the others started throwing masks around and drumming on a table on in the back. Teddy and Will sat together, with Will grabbing onto his arm again whenever it got too loud. Eventually, Wilder moved over to them and started playing with Will's hair, laughing and joking about something that neither of them really understood.

After a while, the van parked at a gas station, and Kali turned to the boys. "Alright, kids, time to stock up."

Wilder's eyes lit up. "Can I come?"

Kali considered, then shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Wilder squealed, grabbing Will's hand and dragging him out of the car. "Let's go, Will!"

Teddy watched them, a little hurt, and turned to see Kali holding out her hand for him. "Come on." she said. "You can help."

He smiled brightly and rushed out of the van with her.

The Convenience Store on the side of the Gas Station was empty, except for one man at the counter. Kali went straight to him, saying, "Hey! Your bathroom is leaking."

The guy looked over, towards the bathroom which was definitely not leaking. However, the man seemed to think it was, running over. It took Teddy a second to realize that Kali had done something to his head, and he started to laugh.

The second the bathroom door closed, Axel turned to them all. "Okay, contestants," he said with a smile, "You have a minute and a half. Let's begin your supermarket sweep!"

They all started running around the store, except for Teddy and Will, who glanced at each other in confusion. Wilder stopped by Will, grabbing his hand and telling them, "Grab as much food as you can!" While she dragged him off somewhere, Teddy wandered over to an aisle, reaching to grab some fruit, then stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the freezer next to the shelf. He threw the door open, and grabbed as many boxes of Eggos as he could carry.

He stopped, though, when he heard somebody yell, "Hey!"

He turned, to see Axel freezing behind the cash register. The man had left the bathroom, and had a gun pointed to him. "Put that back," he said, gesturing to the money in Axel's hands, "Or I'll blow your head off. Hear me, freak?"

He jumped when he saw Kali exit from another aisle, her hands up. She said, very carefully, "Put the gun down."

The man moved the gun inbetween the two. "Stay back." he said. "Stay back!"

"Darrel," Kali said, her eyes flickering to the man's nametag, "Your money is insured. We're only stealing from the war criminal billionaires who own this place. You won't even lose a dime."

"I said *Stay Back!*" Darrel stepped forwards, his gun pointed, and Kali stepped back in surprise.

Teddy's eyes flickered around as he walked towards them. He couldn't see Funshine or Dottie, Mick was in the car, and... where were Will and Wilder?

Suddenly, he realized that he could spot Wilder behind the man,

creeping over, with Will trailing behind her. She was going to jump him from behind.

Kali kept talking, and Teddy wondered if she saw the two behind the man. "We're on the same side. I promise."

Suddenly, Wilder kicked a paint can by accident, and it fell over with a loud *bang*. The man whipped around, the gun pointed right at her and Will, and in a second, Teddy knew he was going to shoot.

He let out a scream, throwing out his hand, and Darrel was thrown against the wall, hitting a stack of boxes and falling over. He didn't get up, but Teddy did notice he was still breathing. The gun slid across the floor, and Wilder picked it up, flipping it over in her hands.

"Damn, Huck." Axel said from behind, and Teddy turned around to see that the group had gathered behind him. He glanced over, to see Will staring at Darrel, brushing blood away from his nose.

Before Teddy could ask what he'd seen, they heard police sirens outside. They jumped, and Axel yelled, "Let's go, go, go!"

They ran out, rushing into the van and calling for Mick to go. They piled in as the car started to speed away, and Wilder started to cheer. "Whoo! Best first day *ever*!"

Teddy turned to Will, who glanced to him and then away quickly. "What is it?" he asked, while everyone was busy filling in Mick on what was going on and Wilder continued cheering.

Will paused, then shook his head. It was his way of saying *Nothing is wrong*. Teddy wasn't sure he believed him.

They drove up to the apartment sometime after the sky went dark. Mick and Axel turned to look at the others after they parked, as Mick said, "We should case the place, stick to the routine. We have time."

"We also have them." Kali said, gesturing to the boys, before turning to Teddy. "Can you look?"

He nodded, grabbing the makeshift blindfold from his jacket pocket and tying it around his eyes. After a second, he pulled it off again, and said, "He's watching television."

"Is he alone?" Mick asked worriedly.

"I saw him." Teddy said. "No one else."

Kali shrugged. "Good enough for me."

"Me, too!" Dottie said.

"And me!" Wilder cheered.

The older kids sighed, and Kali said, "Wilder, we've been over this. You're going to get in the way, and you're not ready."

"No, I can do it! I've been here for way longer than them-" Wilder gestured to both the boys and Dottie- "And I don't wanna wait in the car again!"

"Wilder, stay with Mick." Kali said again.

"But-"

Before anyone could say anything else, Will jumped forwards and grabbed Wilder's arm, before turning to stare at Kali, making a silent statement. They stared for another minute, and then Kali said, "Alright. But you will do whatever I say, and if you get us into some kinda mess, you're going to be in some deep shit. Understand?"

Wilder nodded excitedly, and shot a grateful look at Will before Kali opened the van doors for them. "Keep the car running, Mick. We'll be right back."

Kali made them put the cheap masks on before they entered the building. Will didn't like the feeling of the plastic on his face; it was too cold, and he could hardly see out of the holes. Thankfully, Wilder seemed to be able to see better, and led him up by grabbing his hand. Will could, however, see Teddy fine, and he kept glancing towards

them through his mask. He'd spent enough time around him to know that he was feeling angry, but he wasn't sure about what.

They reached the door of Ray Carroll's apartment, and Teddy stood outside the door, staring until they heard the door unlock itself. They started to slowly enter, looking around the messy apartment. Will grabbed onto Wilder's arm as they did; he started to feel a sense of dread rise in his stomach. Something was wrong, something was *wrong*...

The group stopped after turning a bend; up ahead, Ray Carroll was trying to make his TV work, focused on that and not on the masked intruders behind him. That was, until Kali spoke.

"Hello, Ray."

The man turned around, terror in his eyes, as he tried to run. Funshine stopped him, pushing down into a chair as the rest of them watched. Will started to breathe deeply, a panic rising; Wilder gave him a quick look, that he was sure meant she was confused.

"Just, please..." Ray said, looking around in fear, "Just take what you want."

"Oh, we will." Axel said.

Dottie added, "Where's your wallet?"

Ray stuttered, "Bedroom, my bedroom, jeans..."

"Come on!" Dottie punched Axel's arm, and the two of them ran off.

Will felt Wilder let go of his arm, and she said something like, "I'm gonna look for more shit!" Will felt suddenly alone without her, and he was shaking a little.

Funshine moved to guard the door, and then Kali started to move, to stand in front of Ray. Teddy followed, though he paused a second to hold out his hand for Will. Will shook his head, wanting to stay in one place. He didn't want to move. He didn't know if he *could* without throwing up. He didn't know what was going on with him.

Once Kali and Teddy were in front of Ray, she reached up and slowly removed her mask. Teddy jumped, a little surprised, and hesitantly followed. They stared at the man, and as they did, Will removed his mask with his shaking hand, letting it drop to the floor. He didn't want to even look at it.

"Do you remember us?" Kali asked.

Ray shook his head, and Kali stared at her, her nose starting to trickle blood. Suddenly, Ray's eyes widened, and he said, "Oh, God."

"What about us?" Kali asked again. "Do you remember us, Ray?"

It took Will a second to realize what she was showing him; she was showing them as children. Will slowly stepped closer, and the illusion must have spread to him, because now Ray was staring at him with horror. Will stared back at him, still shaking. He remembered this man, of course he did, he remembered the pain he inflicted onto him, he remembered everything that had happened to him in that hellhole, and he remembered how the man didn't seem to care what the boy had felt, didn't care as he pressed the stick into his skin, letting it shock him into tears. But... *God*, the look the man was giving him, the clear fear he was experiencing, the true feeling that he was going to die... Will never wanted to see that look again.

Kali suddenly leapt forwards, hitting Ray in the head and knocking him to the ground. Will gasped and stepped back, starting to shake even more, and Teddy glanced between them all, confused.

"Please, please..." Ray said, trying to sit up.

That was when Teddy looked dead at him, a spark of anger in his eyes. "You hurt them." he said, and he threw out his hand, knocking him against the wall.

The man was bleeding now, but Will could tell that Teddy didn't care. He was angry, and the spark of anger inside him had turned to a flame of fury. He stepped forwards threateningly, his hands at the ready.

"Wait!" Ray shouted, sitting up again. "Please. Listen... I just did

what he told me to do...”

“You had a choice, Ray.” Kali said, anger behind her normally-calm voice. “And you chose to follow a man you knew was evil.”

Teddy raised his hand again, and Ray yelled, “No! No, no, wait! Wait! I can help... I can help you find him.”

*Him.*

Will felt *cold*, like his entire body had been iced over.

“Who?” Kali asked.

“Brenner!”

*No.*

Will stepped forwards, now, saying in a shaking, broken voice, “Papa is gone.”

Kali jumped, surprised to hear the boy speak. Ray turned to him, and said, “No. He is alive.”

Before he could think about it, Will closed his eyes, focusing on the lights. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Ray was flashing purple and red, but he was *much* more terrified to see that Mike’s normally crystal-blue light was itself starting to dip into red, then back to blue.

It took him only a second to see this, and then Ray continued talking. “I can take you to him.”

“Do not lie to us, Ray.” Kali said.

“I’m not lying.”

“Lying!” Will said, shaking his head. “Papa is gone! Papa is *gone*...”

“No, he trusted me...” Will wasn’t sure if Ray was crying or not; now, the lights were starting to get *brighter*, starting to hurt his eyes, starting to hurt *him*. “I can take you to him.”

“No!” Will started to scream, fully sobbing now. “No! No! No!”



Without thinking, he threw out his own hand, and then he heard the scream.

He froze, staring in horror. Once he'd thrown his hand, the light around Ray had... *shrunk*. Shaking, he clenched his hand, and Ray's light started to collapse in on itself, and Ray screamed again. Kali and Teddy were staring at Will in shock, and he started to feel his heart racing.

Oh, *God*.

*God*, what was he doing? He couldn't do this, he *couldn't*, not even to somebody like Ray.

He released his hand, blinking and allowing the light to disappear. "Will..." Kali said, but Will shook his head. He didn't care what he'd done, he *never* wanted to do it again.

He continued shaking his head, breathing heavily and feeling frozen again. He slowly moved backwards, dropping to the ground and curling up, sobbing.

"Will?" he glanced up, seeing that Wilder- who had no doubt been watching- had run to him. He reached up and hugged her, looking away as he heard another thud of Ray being thrown against the wall.

He couldn't watch anymore.

"What did you do to him?" Teddy asked, throwing Ray to the wall again.

"Nothing! I don't know what the hell is wrong with him!"

"Teddy." Kali said, and he turned to her, confused. She gave him a blank look, before turning back to Ray and saying, "If Papa is alive, Teddy will find him. Just as he found you." She turned back to Teddy, then said, "Go ahead."

"W-wait-" Ray said, but Teddy didn't want to listen to him anymore.

He held out his hand, and Ray started to choke. Teddy was *pushing* around his neck, closing in around it. He moved, too, and Ray was being dragged across the floor.

“Not too quick.” Kali said, an instructional tone to her voice. “He was never quick with us.”

Teddy walked forwards, letting Brenner drag on the floor farther down the hall. His face was turning red, his breathing more shallow, but Teddy didn’t care. This man, he thought he could earn his life by claiming he could bring them to Papa, claiming that Papa was *alive*, thinking that they’d just forgive him for what he’d done to them...

As Teddy was clenching his fist tighter, his anger growing, he felt his gaze flicker to the right of Ray’s head, and then he froze.

On the floor beside him was a photograph, one that had fallen to the ground during the robbery and was shattered. But it was clearly a photo of Ray, his arm around two girls.

Teddy stared, horrified, and dropped his hand. Ray started to desperately breathe, and Teddy stepped back.

This man had children. *Children.*

“What’s wrong?” Kali asked, and Teddy could hear a flicker of concern. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got a problem!” came Axel’s voice; Teddy didn’t turn, still staring at the photo, but he could see Axel and Dottie rush in out of the corner of his eye.

“Kids in the apartment.” Dottie said.

Kali looked from them to Teddy, who was still trying to steady himself, trying to calm his racing mind. Ray was speaking again, choking out words. “Please...”

“He doesn’t deserve your mercy, Teddy.” Kali said over the begging man. “He doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as you.”

Her voice started to go in and out; Teddy’s head was buzzing, his

thoughts pounding against his skull. “He knew what we were, what the Lab had done to us, and he helped them. He knew that we’d been kidnapped, that we were scared and abused children, and he still chose to hurt us.”

Teddy was looking between the photo of the happy family to the man on the ground, who was crying and pleading, still saying, “Please... please... I’m sorry, please...”

He was somebody’s Father. He had two children, two children who he looked happy with. Teddy had been taken away from his own Family at birth, and he’d been taken away from his true family when the Demogorgon dared to attack them. He couldn’t take away these girls from their Father.

“We’ve gotta go, K, they called the cops!” Axel yelled.

“We finish this first!” Kali shouted back. “Teddy, *now!*”

He couldn’t. He couldn’t take someone’s Father away.

Kali finally grew impatient, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a gun, pointing it straight at Ray’s head. Ray screamed, and in a panic, Mike cocked his head, and the gun flew out of Kali’s hands, crashing right out the window.

Kali turned to Teddy, and when he looked back at her, he saw a rare emotion showing on her face- disbelief.

That was when they heard the sirens.

Teddy turned back to the window, and glanced down to see Will, crying and clutching to Wilder, whose face was hidden behind the mask, but she was looking towards the window, then back towards Kali.

“We gotta go, *now!*” Axel yelled, and he and Dottie rushed past them. After a second, Kali ran, too, and Wilder grabbed Will and dragged him to his feet, trying to drag him away. After a second, Will released her hand and instead stumbled over to Teddy, grabbing his arm and crying.

Teddy turned to Ray, and said, “Leave us alone.”

And then they ran out of the apartment, leaving him on the ground.

## 31. Papa is Gone

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### *Papa is Gone*

Kali was furious on the drive back.

She glared at the boys, first, then spoke directly to Teddy. “If you wanted to show mercy, that is your choice. But don’t you ever take away mine. Ever. Do you understand? *Do you understand?*”

Teddy just stared at her, then turned away, his hand still holding Will’s.

Will stared at the floor, and said, so quietly that only Teddy could hear, “I want Mom.”

Teddy squeezed his hand, and continued to stare out the window the entire, silent drive back.

They sat in their room quietly, with Will still gripping onto Teddy’s arm.

It was several minutes before Teddy said, “You don’t need me anymore.”

“What?” Will asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You have your Mom, and your Brother, hell, even here you’ve got Wilder.” Teddy said, trying not to cry; he’d cried enough for the day. “You don’t need me anymore. You can leave me if you want, you don’t need me as your friend.”

“Mike...” Will said, and Teddy realized that he was using his other name. “Mike, you don’t stop being my friend just because I don’t *need* you at the moment. Is... is that what you think?”

He bit his lip and didn't meet his eye.

"Mike, you're my friend because I like being around you and I *care* about you." Will said. "Not because I need something from you. And the same goes for Nancy, and Lucas, and Dustin, and El."

At the sound of her name, Teddy jumped and looked back to him. Will looked surprised, then said again, "You're my friend, and... you scared me today."

"Scared?"

Will didn't clarify, instead looking away.

It was several more, silent minutes, before there was a knock at the wall. The boys looked up, to see Kali peering through the doorway. "May I sit?" she asked.

Will stared at the ground as Teddy nodded, and Kali cautiously entered and sat on the rolling chair next to the bed. They were quiet for a bit, as she seemed to be waiting for them to say something. When they didn't, Kali finally said something.

"I was once just like you, do you know that?" she paused, then said, "That's why I'm hard on you, because I see in you my past mistakes."

Will still didn't say anything, so Teddy spoke. "There were kids."

Kali looked at him. "Does that excuse that man's sins? Were *we* not also children?"

Teddy looked away, trying to stare at *anything* else, and Kali turned to Will. Her voice broke a little as she said, "I remember... I remember the day they dragged you from the Rainbow Room. They took you and I wasn't strong enough to do anything."

Will finally looked at her, tears in his eyes. Kali continued. "I wasn't strong enough to get them to let you go, or even to find you after I used my gifts to escape. I couldn't find what Lab you were in, how to get into any of them, even who you were supposed to be. I started to fear... that you were gone forever, and it was because of me."

She took a deep breath, trying to shield her emotions again, and then she said, "After I escaped, I ran. I ran away as far as I could. And it was there, far away, that I found a place to hide. A family. A home."

Her voice was breaking again, but she gave up trying to hide it. "Just like you and your Mother, Will. And you and Nancy, Teddy."

The boys were finally both looking at her. "But they couldn't help me." Kali continued, biting her lip and holding back tears. "And eventually, I lost them, too."

She looked away, briefly, and Teddy stared at her. He had no idea. He guessed he should have thought about how she'd gotten out, how she couldn't have just instantly found her Gang. How she might have had something like them, once.

Kali finally said, "So, I decided to play the part. To stop hiding. To use my gifts *against* those who hurt us. You're now faced with the same choice, boys: Go back into hiding and hope they don't find you, or fight, and face them again."

Teddy took in a quick breath. "Face who?"

"The man who calls himself our Father."

The boys both stiffened, and Will gripped harder onto his brother's arm. Teddy finally said, "Papa is Dead."

"That man tonight disagreed."

Both boys felt their blood turn cold; that voice didn't come from Kali's mouth. It was a man's, and they recognized that voice. The voice they'd heard all throughout their life.

They slowly turned towards the door, and Papa was standing there.

Teddy stood, first, with Will moving to hide behind him, shaking. "You're not real." Teddy said, staring him down. It was an illusion, he knew it. He couldn't be there. He was dead.

"All this time, and you haven't looked for me." said the illusion of Brenner. "Why?"

Kali had stood and moved to the back of the room, as Teddy stepped forwards, with Will trying to drag him away, trying to keep him from getting closer.

“Because you thought I was dead?” Brenner asked. “Or because you were afraid of what you might find?”

“Go away.” Teddy said, as he heard Will start to cry.

The illusion of Brenner started to move closer, and Teddy stepped back in shock.

“You have to confront your pain.” Brenner said, as the boys retreated farther, and Will moved from behind Teddy to beside him, still gripping his arm but looking more determined to stare the man down. “You have wounds, children. Horrible wounds. And they’re festering.”

Teddy stopped moving, freezing in place. Will just kept shaking, trying to force himself to stare at the man before them. “Do you remember what that means, Eleven?” the illusion asked. “*Festering?* I means to rot.”

Papa stopped in front of them, kneeling down so they were forced to look him in the face. “And they will grow.” he said, his voice starting to echo around them. “Spread.”

Teddy’s breath caught in his throat, terrified. Will was the one to speak. “Get out of our heads.” he said, his words coming out choked.

“And eventually,” Papa said, “They will kill you.”

Teddy screamed, his panic finally boiling over and erupting, and Will screamed, too, repeating himself. “*Get out of our heads!*”

Teddy crumpled to the floor, hugging himself, and he felt Will wrap his arms around him, and he was crying, too. The two of them shook and sobbed for what felt like forever, but what had to only be a few seconds. Eventually, Teddy looked up, and saw Kali kneeling in front of them, her face once again blank.

“This isn’t a prison, boys.” Kali said with a slight comforting tone.



“You’re always free to return to your Indiana Town. Or stay, and destroy the people who will keep on trying to destroy us. Let us heal our wounds. Together.”

She really thought she was helping. She didn’t know. She didn’t *know* how much that hurt. How could she not know?

Kali left, then, leaving them alone. Teddy looked down again, and kept crying.

## 32. We Have to Go Back

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

#### *We Have to Go Back*

Will was asleep, curled up on the bed under the extra blankets. Teddy hadn't been able to find it in him to rest, instead sitting on the edge of the bed, staring down at the sweater in his hands. The one Nancy had stolen from the Attic for him. From El's attic.

He shut his eyes, focusing on the clothing he was holding. He hugged it to his chest, taking a deep breath.

*"My name's El. It's short for Jane Eleanor Hopper, but I like El better. Jane Eleanor sounds like a Princess, which is nice, I guess, but El sounds like a Knight. I think that'd be more fun."*

*"Do you like Michael? Or, we could shorten it. What do you think of 'Mike'?"*

*"Nice to make your acquaintance, Mike."*

*"Well, a- a friend... it's someone you'd do anything for, you make them feel better when they're down, you keep them away from bullies, and you never break a promise."*

*"Yes. We're friends. And friends don't lie."*

*"No, Mike, you're not the monster! You saved us, Mike! You saved Twelve, and you saved me! You saved me, Mike!"*

*"There's not much here, but we can fix it up, right? Make it better."*

*"It's like kind of... an agreement, to settle both sides of an argument. Halfway happy."*

*"I don't want you to get hurt. I don't know what I'd do if you got hurt and I couldn't do anything. I... I don't want to lose you."*

*He was in the Mind Place now.*

*He was surprised, looking around for a second. He suddenly saw Nancy, far away, standing in front of some kind of computer. She was staring at it and groaning and looking around. Teddy slowly approached, trying to figure out what was going on.*

*"I was there. That's where the boys found me." Nancy gestured towards the screen. "That place is a graveyard."*

*Suddenly, he heard a shout behind him.*

*"It's a trap!"*

*A voice without an owner shouted a "Whoa!", and as Teddy turned, he saw El, running forwards, pushed back by something invisible.*

*"El." he said, his entire body freezing over at the sight of her.*

*"It's a trap!" she yelled again. "I have to warn them, it's a trap! It's a trap!"*

*"El!" Teddy shouted, running forwards. He had to get to him, he had to help.*

*"It's trap!" she said one more time, as Teddy managed to reach her and reached forwards, wanting to hug her, wanting to touch her and tell her it was okay, that he was there, that he would protect her.*

*But the second he touched her, her image disappeared into smoke.*

*He was alone, then, alone in the blackness. "El?" he shouted, whipping around, trying to see her, find her. "El? El! El! El!"*

*He started to cry again, his breath coming out in shallow bursts as he used most of his breathing to scream for her.*

*Suddenly, he heard thuds. Large, long, thuds, that were a lot closer than they should be.*

Teddy opened his eyes, suddenly back in Kali's room. He dropped the jacket, letting it fall to the floor, as he heard a door burst open. He whipped around, shaking Will awake. "Will! We have to go, something's wrong!" he said, trying to hide his tears as he did.

Will sat up, looking at him in a panic.

The two jumped up, peering out the window, to see the floor beneath them, swarming with Police Officers. Teddy felt a tap on his shoulder, and the boys turned to see Kali behind them. "Let's go!" she whispered, gesturing for them to follow.

They rushed across a hall, running up stairs to a third floor, going as fast as they could before they could be spotted.

As they ran in, they saw the rest of the gang, crowded into the room and looking very confused. "What the hell's going on?" Axel asked, shooting to his feet.

"They found us!" Kali announced, pushing the boys ahead of her.

"They *what*?" Wilder asked, a look of panic in her eyes as she got to her feet.

They all started to move, but Kali held out her hands. "No, shh!" she said. Holding out her arms until they all stood still.

Suddenly, the officers burst into the room, guns out. Teddy stiffened, pushing Will behind him, until he realized that the eyes of all the policemen passed right over them. Teddy's gaze drifted to Kali, to see her hands still extended towards the group.

*"I can make people see, or not see, whatever I choose."*

After a second, the others started to slowly move towards the exit as the policemen continued to swarm the room. Teddy grabbed onto Will's hand, the two of them dodging men and trying to follow the others; at the same time, Funshine grabbed onto Wilder's hand, keeping her close to him. Once they were all past the men, they broke into a run, rushing down the stairs and following Kali to the

door leading outside, where the Van was waiting for them.

Kali threw the door open, and they all rushed out; they noticed instantly that there were more police cars parked outside, and officers started shooting.

“Go! Go!” Kali yelled, looking back to make sure everybody was following her as they rushed to the van. Mick reached back to push the boys ahead of her, and the group ducked behind the car. Axel pulled out a gun of his own, leaning over and firing a few shots, before turning back to them.

They could hear bullets hit the side of the van, and Will started to shake again, covering his ears and whimpering. Axel yelled, “Do something, Kal! Do something!”

Teddy glanced over at Kali, who had her eyes shut and was slowly raising her hand. She suddenly opened her eyes, and the gunfire ceased.

“What’s going on?” Teddy asked.

Kali shook her head. “We only have a minute, get into the car!”

Teddy froze, staring at Will, as Funshine opened the doors and started shepherding people inside. He helped Will to his feet, and they watched as everyone rushed into the Van. Kali jumped in last, turning around to see the boys still outside. She looked confused, and simply said, “Will, Teddy, get in.”

The boys glanced at each other, and Teddy suddenly realized that Will’s stare held a look he hadn’t seen in a while- *trust*. Whatever he chose to do, Will trusted him to pick the right choice.

So he sighed, turning towards the Van, and said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but we have to go back.”

Kali stared at them in shock, as Teddy continued to stutter an explanation. “Our friends... our friends are in danger.”

Axel peered over, yelling, “This isn’t time for a talk, we gotta go, right now!”

Wilder, sitting next to Dottie, glancing between the boys in confusion. “Will? Move your ass, we gotta go!”

Will shook his head, and Kali spoke next. “Boys, please, we just found each other. We found each other for a reason, your dreams sent you here. We belong together. There’s nothing back for you, there! *They cannot save you!*”

Teddy grabbed Will’s hand tighter, and said, very certainly, “No. But we can save them.”

So they gave their sister one last smile, and then they ran.

Teddy cried all the way to the bus stop. This time, Will was the one who was strong, holding his arm and smiling at him, whispering, “We’ll find them. We’ll find them, don’t worry.”

They had just enough money for the bus ride home, and sat together, with Teddy leaning against the window and watching the sights. Snow was starting to fall, sometimes hitting the window.

*El would love this view.* He thought. *So would Nancy.*

They were going to find them. And he wanted them to be proud of him when he did.

Will poked his shoulder. “Teddy?”

He paused, took another deep breath, and said, “Mike.”

The bus sped through the snow, heading home.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And thus ends the week of Kali. Tomorrow, we begin again at the Lab, with our Maximum Angst Train starting up again.

### 33. She's Lying

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

##### *She's Lying*

"The power's down." Hopper observed, looking up at the building in front of them.

"No." Joyce rolled her eyes. "Couldn't have guessed that."

The two had driven to the Lab after investigating Hopper's house again, eventually realizing that the best plan was to start there. But everything was shut down, which either meant they were right about the problem stemming from that place, or something *else* was very, very wrong.

"This isn't right." Hopper said. "There's no way that Lab would power down under anything short of an emergency."

Joyce nodded. "I know. Some shit's going down in there, and is it really bad that I hope our kids are the problem?"

"It's better than something we don't know about causing the power outage." Hopper said. "But we should probably assume that there's a different problem going on than just our kids."

"So, how do we get in? You've still got the break-in tools in the car?" Joyce asked.

"Well, here's the thing." Hopper said, turning back to her. "If someone or something is in there that's not supposed to get out, we probably don't want to leave a giant, gaping hole in the fence."

"So, how are we getting in?"

Before Hopper could answer, they heard a crash from the woods.

They turned around, with Hopper shining a flashlight in the direction

of the sound. They slowly started approaching, and started to hear several footsteps running towards them. A small light- from maybe a small flashlight- was coming closer. "Hello?" Hopper called.

The footsteps halted for a second, and then suddenly sounded faster. At that moment, two boys burst from the woods.

It was Lucas and Dustin.

The boys were holding hands, and Lucas's free hand was held in front of them, a small circle of light shining from it. Dustin's free hand held what looked like a small bag, and Hopper swore he saw the tip of a knife breaking through part of the fabric.

The four of them stared at each other for a good, long while, and then Dustin said, "Uh... Hello, sir."

"Lucas? Dustin?" Hopper asked, still a little in shock at the sudden appearance of two children who'd disappeared for a year. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" Dustin shot back, while Lucas clenched his hand, letting the light vanish.

"W-wait..." Joyce looked between the boys, realization dawning on her face. "You're Will's friends."

"Will?" Lucas stared at her in confusion.

Dustin remembered first. "Oh! That's Twelve!"

"You know Twelve?" Lucas asked.

Joyce flinched at the number, but nodded. "Well, yes, I'm his Mother, and-"

"You're Will's Mother." Dustin repeated, eyes wide.

"Holy shit." Lucas said.

"Kids, do you know where Will is?" Joyce asked.



“Or El and Max?” Hopper added.

The boys stiffened. “Uh... they’re not in there, are they?” Dustin asked, pointing to the Lab.

“If we knew, we wouldn’t be asking.” Hopper said.

“Why?” Joyce asked.

That was when they heard the Screech.

They all recognized the screech. It was the same one the Monster always gave.

And it was coming from the Lab.

“Oh, God.” Joyce said.

They all looked to each other, and Lucas said, “I have a plan. But it’s a bad one.”

“Well,” Hopper said, glancing again to the Lab, “Let’s hear it.”

Lucas took a deep breath. “It starts with me going in alone, and it goes downhill from there.”

“Absolutely not.” Hopper said first.

“Hold on, let’s hear him out.” Dustin said.

“I’m not sending you in there alone!” Hopper yelled.

“Well, then,” Lucas shouted back, “You have a better way to get them out alive?”

Nancy burst into the hall staring up at the two Guards who were holding El back; Jonathan was there, too, trying to calm her down, but El just kept screaming. She looked right at Nancy and yelled, “Nance, it’s a trap-”

“I know.” Nancy said quickly, turning to the Guards. “There are

Monsters in the building. They're about to break through the glass. We have to kill them before they kill us!"

The Guards released El, drawing their guns and rushing off towards the place Nancy came from. She started to follow, but Jonathan grabbed her arm to stop her. She turned around, about to tell him off, but caught sight of El, who looked frozen. "El?" she asked.

"We're too late." El said, then she screamed, "*We're too late!*"

She whipped around, running back towards Max's room. Nancy and Jonathan gave each other a quick look, and then they followed her.

El burst into the room, where Steve was waiting with Max. "What's going on?" Steve asked them. "What the hell?"

"They got in." El said simply, before turning towards the counter, looking for something.

"What? Who got in?" Steve turned to the other teens.

"Damnit, Steve, take a guess." Nancy said. "We've gotta get out, before those things-"

She heard a smash, and turned around to see that El had knocked some glass to the ground. She turned towards them, a syringe in her hands. Nancy recognized it from before- it was the one they used to drug Max.

"We need to knock Max out." El said.

"What?" Max sat up, instantly alert.

"El, what the f-" Nancy began.

El interrupted her. "She's possessed! She's a spy! If she knows where we are, so does the Shadow Monster!"

Max started to scream, suddenly furious. "No! She's lying! She's *lying!*"

"She killed those soldiers!" El yelled. "She'll kill us, too!"

“She’s *lying!*” Max started to try and get up, and Steve jumped to hold her down on the bed. “She’s *lying! She’s lying! She’s lying!*”

They heard gunshots from the hall, and Jonathan whipped around. “Shit!” he yelled.

“*She’s lying!*” Max continued to scream, undeterred by the noise. “*She’s lying!*”

“Hold her down!” El shouted at the teens.

“*She’s lying!*”

Nancy jumped forwards, pushing Steve away and grabbing Max’s shoulders. “Max, Max, listen!”

Max paused for a second, but her face was still furious. Nancy took a deep breath, then pointed to El. “Who is that?”

“What?” El asked.

“Max, tell me who that is.” Nancy said again.

Max looked to El, and Nancy saw what she feared she would: there was no recognition in her eyes. There was a long, silent pause, as Max stared, her anger turning to panic. “That’s...”

Nancy took a deep breath, and said, “I’ll hold her down.”

“What? No!” Max started screaming, as Nancy pressed against her arms and El rushed forwards. “Let me go! *Let me go! Let me go!*”

Jonathan jumped forwards, too, pushing up Max’s sleeve, and El paused, steadying herself before sticking the syringe into her friend’s arm.

“*Let me go!*” Max continued to shout. “*Let me go! Let me go! Let... me go... let...*”

She fell back into the bed, knocked out. El dropped the syringe into her pocket, breathing deeply to keep herself from crying.

The door opened, and Owens ran in. He looked down at the scene in confusion, and Nancy said, "Help us carry her out. We gotta go."

The group ran through the hall, alarms still blaring loudly and gunshots echoing across halls, mixed with terrified screams. They stopped moving when they saw a body fall across the end of the hall. They turned around, only to hear a screech from that direction.

"Shit!" Jonathan said again, then he turned to a door on their right and pushed it open. They ran in, closing and locking the door.

They seemed to be in some kind of storage room, and Owens passed Max to Nancy before turning to lock the door. Nancy dropped the girl on a table in the corner, before turning to the rest of them. "I need a gun."

"You are *not* going out there!" Steve yelled.

"We can't just sit here and let them die!" Nancy shouted.

"Guys..." El said, and they all turned to her.

She was staring at the far wall, which held security monitors for the whole building. On each screen, a small Demogorgon was running through the halls, attacking people, *killing* people, *eating* people. Jonathan moved first, pushing El away from the screens and shielding her eyes despite her protests.

At that moment, the lights flickered, and then everything went black.

They all stared at each other in horror, their eyes trying to adjust to the light, and then El said, "We are in such deep shit."

## 34. Blackout

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

#### *Blackout*

Owens managed to produce a map of the Lab, with Nancy's dying flashlight their only source of light. He drew a circle on one area, saying "This is us, and *this* is the nearest exit."

He pointed to one spot, which was quite a while away.

"Even if we could somehow make it," he said, "There's no way out. The locks are fail-secure."

"Fail-Secure?" Steve asked.

"It means the building goes on lockdown when there's a power outage." El said numbly, sitting on the table next to Max's unconscious body. "It's a way to prevent someone from knocking out the power and stealing shit. Like, for example, children."

"Is this the time?" Nancy glared at her.

El huffed and turned back to Max; she'd recently pulled her friend's hair out of the bun, letting it fall over the table; she knew that Max hated having her hair up, so El had undone the bun once they realized they were locked in.

"Well, can we unlock the doors?" Steve asked. "There's gotta be a way to do that."

"With a computer, sure," Owens said, "But somebody's gotta reset the breakers."

"Where are those?" Jonathan asked.

"Breakers are in the basement." Owens turned back to the Map, drawing another circle in the area. "Three floors down."

Nancy immediately turned to go; Jonathan grabbed her arm. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“To reset the breakers.” Nancy said.

“No, you’re not!” Steve jumped.

“Okay, then what?” Jonathan asked, still staring at Nancy.

“Then we get the hell out of here.” Nancy responded.

“No, then the power goes back on.” El said from the table, looking up. “If you wanna unlock the doors, you’re going to have to reboot the power system and override the security codes with a manual input.” She turned to Owens. “Is that right?”

When he nodded, Nancy said, “Okay, how do I do that?”

“You can’t, unless you know BASIC.” El shrugged.

“What’s that?” Nancy asked.

“It’s a Computer Programming Language.” Jonathan responded. “I know some of it-”

“And I know more.” El said. “From AV Club and extra-credit shit.”

“Alright, teach it to me.” Nancy said.

El rolled her eyes. “Sure. And while we’re at it, wanna learn Latin?” She turned to Owens. “You know BASIC?” Owens shook his head, and El turned around. “Well, looks like I’m your girl, then.”

Instantly, the teens erupted. “No!” Steve yelled, as Nancy said, “Absolutely not.” and Jonathan shook his head, “We’re not letting you do that.”

El looked between them. “Look, either I sneak down there and restart the computers, or we all wait here to die of starvation or Demogorgon. Take your pick.”

“Well, you’re not going alone.” Nancy said.

"I'll take her." Jonathan said, and they all turned to him.

"What? No, no, I meant *me*." Nancy shook her head.

"I know what you *meant*." Jonathan sighed. "Look, we're the only ones here who know *anything* about BASIC. She's gonna need all the help she can get."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." El said.

"Can the sarcasm." Steve said to her.

"We're about to die, I can say whatever I damn well please." El rolled her eyes. "And I'd like to drop the f-bomb a couple more times before I go, so while we're here—"

"We're not going to die!" Nancy said. "If I just get a gun, I can—"

"Nancy." Jonathan interrupted her, grabbing her hand. "Listen. We'll go. It's okay. You stay here and protect Max."

"But..." Nancy looked between them all, then reached up to hug Jonathan, clutching him to her. "Don't you dare die. If you die on me, Jonathan Byers, I swear to God..."

"I'm not going to die." Jonathan said, after she pulled away. "None of us are."

Nancy paused before she eventually let go of his hand, staring after him as he walked over to El. "Now, listen," he said to the kid. "If one of those monsters shows up, no heroics. You get behind me and run."

El glared at him, but said, "Copy that, Byers."

"El..." Nancy said, walking forwards. She took a deep breath, and said, "And Steve, too. If I don't make it out of this building—"

"You will." Jonathan and Steve said together.

"If I don't make it out..." Nancy continued. "I've got a treehouse in the woods. There's... there's something there, and you need to get it out. Understand?"

“What is it?” El asked, her curiosity showing.

Nancy took a deep breath, “Well, you’re gonna have to survive long enough to find out, aren’t you?”

El sighed and nodded, jumping off the table and looking up at Jonathan. “Lead the way.”

They ran out of the room as fast as they could. Nancy stared at the door long after they left, feeling a dark fear rise in her chest. She couldn’t lose El. She couldn’t lose Jonathan.

Eventually, she turned back to the others and picked Max up, waiting for when the lights would go back on.

El waited in the stairwell until Jonathan returned, dragging a bloody corpse of what was once a security guard with him.

“Damn.” El said, glancing away from the wounds. “Those things are messy.”

“Grab his Walkie.” Jonathan said, and El reached down to get the communicator, as Jonathan continued going through the guard’s pockets, eventually grabbing a keycard, a small flashlight, and a gun. “You know how to use this?” he asked El.

She nodded. “My Dad’s the Chief of Police. I think I’d know how to use a gun.”

“Great, then you’re in charge of it.” Jonathan tossed it to her.

“Pretty shitty that we’re robbing a dead guy.” El quipped, flipping the gun over and checking the safety settings.

“Well, he’s not gonna use this shit.” Jonathan said. “Here’s the plan, we’re going down there, and we’re gonna reset the computers, and then we’re going to get the others out.”

El nodded. “And then we save Max.”



Jonathan grabbed her hand, and they rushed down the stairs.

Jonathan stayed ahead, shining the light around and listening for every possible noise before pressing ahead. El kept the gun in her hands, at the ready in case there was trouble.

Finally, they reached the right door, and Jonathan pushed it open, jumping when his flashlight shed light on several bloody corpses. “What is it?” El asked.

Jonathan’s first instinct was to tell her not to look, but that was a bit unavoidable. “Bodies.” he eventually said. “Don’t look if you can avoid it.”

“Wonderful.” El said. “Well, I can’t exactly hold a gun and close my eyes at the same time, so we’re going to have to just keep going.”

Jonathan nodded, then walked forwards, stepping over the bodies as he did. El flinched when she saw them, but moved her eyes back up towards the wall, looking ahead at the switches that lined it.

She was the one to spot the switch for the main power, gesturing at it. Jonathan grabbed it, said, “Here we go,” and flipped it. The lights suddenly surged back, coating the room in white. Jonathan flipped a few more switches, and just like that, the power was back.

“Now, onto the damn doors.” he said, pocketing the flashlight and looking for the computer.

“The Power’s back.” Joyce said.

Hopper, Lucas and Dustin followed her gaze, seeing the lights turn on in the building windows.

“We can get the Gate open.” Hopper said, rushing towards the booth that Security would use to manually open. He started pressing the “Open” button, but nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” Dustin poked his head in, looking down at the button. “What’s that?”

“It’s a button to open the fence.” Hopper explained. “But it’s not working!”

“How does a button open a fence?” Dustin asked.

“That’s not important right now!” Hopper groaned. “What’s important is even with the power on, the Gates still won’t-”

“Dustin?” Joyce looked into the booth, and they turned to her. “Uh, do you... did you see where Lucas went?”

They all froze, and turned towards the place they’d left him.

“Goddamn it!” Hopper yelled.

Lucas had vanished.

## 35. Escape

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

#### *Escape*

“Okay, Jonathan, can you hear us?”

El and Jonathan looked down, hearing a voice from the Walkie-Talkie. El picked it up and said, “Well, *I* can hear you. Not sure if Jonathan can. I’ll ask.”

“El, this is not the time.” Jonathan scolded.

El rolled her eyes at him as Owens continued, “We can see you on the Security Monitors. You good?”

“It’s a Day at the Beach.” El responded. “But I’m gonna have to redirect you to Jonathan, because I’m about to save your asses.”

She tossed the teenager the Walkie-Talkie and then turned to the Computer, starting to type in codes. “Jonathan?” Nancy’s voice came from the communicator. “Jonathan, are you guys actually okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Are you safe?” Jonathan called back.

“For now.” Nancy said. “Don’t take any risks while you’re down there-”

“Shut up, I need to focus!” El yelled back, racking her brains for every bit of coding knowledge she’d retained from Mr. Clarke and the Library books that the Librarians had laughed at her for checking out, asking if she’d rather read *Peter Rabbit*.

It was finally quiet, and she kept typing until a screen came up, letting her select “Door Access.” She clicked it, seeing options to open doors on all floors.

“I’m in.” she smirked, and hit “OPEN” on the First Floor.

A low buzz sounded, and she kept pressing, opening the doors on all floors. She jumped around, turning to Jonathan. "Tell them we're coming out."

The Gate suddenly opened, and Hopper sighed. "Thank God. Something must have slowed down the power before."

"What about Lucas?" Dustin asked.

"If he's in that building, we'll get him out." Hopper promised, turning to him and Joyce. "Get in my car, we're going in."

"Get out of there!" Owens said over the walkie-talkie, and they could see Jonathan and El rush out of the Computer Room.

"Time to go." Nancy said, running to Max and moving to pick her up; however, Steve got there first, lifting the girl in his arms.

"Take this." Owens said, handing Nancy a walkie-talkie.

"What's this for?" she asked.

He simply responded, "Any more surprises, I'll let you know."

Nancy's eyes widened. "No, no, you can't stay here, it's a death trap."

"Look, just get the kid out of here." Owens said. "Get out and don't look back."

"Nancy, we should hurry." Steve said.

Nancy took a deep breath, then said, "Thank you."

They ran out of the room, then, rushing down flights of stairs until they made it to the main floor. Steve ran out the door, still holding Max, but Nancy paused, waiting.

"Nancy, we can wait outside." Steve said.

Nancy shook her head. "I want to make sure they get here."

He paused, before nodding.

"Jonathan, Jane, I'm gonna guide you, okay?"

Jonathan glanced at El. "Who the hell is Jane?"

"That's me." El groaned, taking the Walkie-Talkie from him. "The hell's the problem?"

"Nothing, it's just... uh, getting a little crowded up here, so we're gonna have to take this slow."

"Great." El sighed, tossing the communicator back at the teen. "Just how I wanted to die."

"Okay." Jonathan said to Owens, as they started walking forwards. "So, how do you get *El* from *Jane*?"

"You get it from *Eleanor*."

The two turned a corner, and Owens said, "Okay, your next right." They went that direction. "Now, keep going. Keep going."

"Doc, there are bodies here." Jonathan said as they started to run.

"Stop!" Owens yelled, and they froze in place.

"What is it?" Jonathan asked.

Owens took a minute to respond. "There's a door on your left, do you see that?"

They looked, and Owens said, "That's a closet. Get in."

"What?" Jonathan asked.

"Now! Get in! Now!"

Jonathan pushed the door open, and they ran in. He shut the door,

and as they waited, trying to quiet their breathing, El glanced around. “Sweet.” she whispered, walking forwards and grabbing Steve’s baseball bat from the floor, the nails still on it. The Lab Workers must have stuffed it in there once they deemed it too dangerous to hand back to him.

After a second, they both saw a shadow appear under the door, and they froze as they heard a low gurgling. They knew what was outside that door, and El readied the bat in her hands, waiting for it to burst through. However, the thing passed by, and after a pause, Owens said, “Okay, it’s safe to get out. You alright?”

“Never better.” Jonathan said.

“Okay, you’ve got a pretty clear shot to the door.”

“Okay.”

“You can do this, alright? You’re almost home free, kids.”

El pressed the walkie-talkie, saying, “We’re ready, okay? We’re going.”

She pushed open the door, still holding the bat, and the two of them stepped out. Unfortunately, as they did, they saw a Demogorgon turn the corner.

“Shit!” El yelled, and her and Jonathan broke into a run.

Jonathan managed to push El ahead of him, staying behind her in case that thing caught up, and they ran down the halls. El only barely managed to push open doors with one hand, keeping the other one on the bat. They reached a locked door, and El let out a long string of curses while Jonathan swiped the keycard, pushing her through and locking the door behind them.

They were in the main foyer, and when they turned around, Nancy was there. “Jonathan!” she yelled, eyes wide. “El! Come on!”

“Go, go!” Jonathan pushed El ahead again, but she stopped.

“Where’s Max?” she asked.

“She’s outside, just go-!” Nancy yelled, and that’s when they heard another screech.

El only briefly caught a glimpse of a Demogorgon charging at them, before she felt Jonathan’s hands push her forwards, throwing her towards Nancy. She landed on the ground, the bat flying out of her hands, and she heard Nancy let out a deathly scream. El turned, seeing Jonathan holding his hands over his face, trying to block himself from the Demogorgon that was about to hit him-

When suddenly, a small form darted inbetween Jonathan and the Monster, throwing out his hands, and some sort of air pushed the Demogorgon back. Once it hit the wall, crumpling to the floor, El turned to look at what it was.

Lucas stood there, taking deep breaths and staring at the wall, with blood trickling from his nose.

“Lucas?” El asked, as Nancy rushed forwards, clutching Jonathan to her in a desperate hug.

“Run!” Lucas yelled, moving over and pushing the two teens away. “More coming! Run!”

El jumped to her feet as they passed, grabbing onto Lucas’s hand as they did and barely remembering to grab the bat, and they ran out of the building.

“What the hell?” Steve asked, his eyes immediately falling to the new boy. “Lucas, what the *hell* are you doing here?”

“Snuck in through the pipes.” Lucas said simply. “I’m the only one who can fit. I came to find you-”

A car beeped, and they all turned, seeing a car drive up. The window rolled down, and Hopper called, “Get in!”

They glanced at each other in confusion and resignation, and ran for the car.

## 36. The Mind Flayer

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this is so late. My Mom forced me to go clothes shopping... ugh...

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

#### *The Mind Flayer*

Joyce placed Max on the couch. The kids sat on the ground, glancing at each other, while Nancy continued to hold Jonathan's hand. Steve glanced at them but didn't say anything, while Hopper leaned against the wall behind the children. They'd only just arrived at the Byers house- which happened to be nearest.

"Where's Will?" Joyce asked as soon as the crowd had settled.

"He's not with you?" Jonathan asked.

"Will?" Nancy asked.

"Twelve." Dustin responded; he and Lucas were sitting on the floor with El.

"Twelve's here?" Nancy asked.

"Well, apparently he's not!" Joyce said, starting to move. "I'm going out to find him."

"Wait, wait, no!" Jonathan grabbed her hand. "No, Mom, there are monsters out there!"

"That's why we need to find him!" Joyce said.

"Will's been gone a while." El said.

Joyce immediately turned to her. "What?"



"When we got to the Lab," the girl continued, "They said they searched your house because they found something in it. If they'd found Will, I have a feeling Jonathan would've gotten an earful. So he's been gone since then, meaning that he's probably gotten pretty far."

"The best we can do is wait here." Hopper said. "He'll come back."

"Excuse me?" Nancy asked, interrupting the conversation and waving her hand. "Hi, it's me, how long has *Twelve* been here?"

"Uh..." Jonathan paused. "Since he disappeared?"

"Three-hundred and fifty-three days." El said.

"And you didn't think this was relevant information?" Nancy asked, looking between all of them. "What, you all knew?"

"I didn't!" Steve said, throwing up his hands. "I'm pissed, too! What the hell, guys?"

"Well, we've been out of town." Dustin said. "Don't blame us."

"Nancy, we couldn't tell everyone." Jonathan said. "We've been hiding him from the Lab. The more people who knew about him..."

Nancy paused, took a breath, and said, "Okay, okay. You know what? Fine. Fine, I get it, right now we need to focus on Max."

They all looked to the girl on the couch, and Hopper spoke first. "I can call the army. They can go to the Lab, they can try and get anyone out who's still there."

"Which will be no one." El said under her breath, staring at the ground.

Hopper gave her a look, then said, "We'll stay here and wait for help." and went to go find the phone.

"We can't just *sit here*." El said, glancing away. "Not with those bastards still running loose in the Lab. They'll get out eventually, and then they'll run through the town. And by that point, Max'll be

gone.”

“Gone?” Lucas asked.

El took a deep breath, then said, “That thing has just been taking her over. Slowly. If she’s still in there, she won’t be for longer and... and I don’t want to lose her again.”

“You won’t.” El looked up, to see Nancy standing over her. “You won’t, we’re going to get her out.”

“We can’t talk to her, and even if we could, he’d just send an army after us.” El huffed, and then she stopped. She looked up again, a spark in her eyes. “His army.”

She jumped to her feet, looking around to the others. “*His* army!”

“Yeah, he’s got an army.” Steve said. “That doesn’t help us at all. It gives us negative help.”

“No, you don’t understand!” El shook her head, glancing around at everyone. “If we can stop *him*, maybe we can stop his army!”

They all still looked confused at her, and she turned to Jonathan and Joyce. “Do you still have the drawing of the Shadow Monster?”

“On the kitchen table-” Joyce said, and El rushed out. She found the paper easily, spreading it out, and slamming it on the table. Dustin and Lucas were the first to follow her, running and standing on either side of her, while everyone else filtered in.

“This Thing got Max that day in the Field.” El said, once she was sure there were enough people there. “The Doctor said it was like a virus, it infected her. This virus, it connects him to the tunnels, and to the rest of the Demogorgons.”

“Demodogs.” Dustin said.

El shot him a look. “What?”

Dustin shrugged. “They’re like Dogs, but also Demogorgons. Demodogs.”

“Right. Sure.” El shrugged. “These Demodogs, they’re part of His Army.”

At that moment, Hopper walked in. “What’s going on?”

“Your daughter’s cracked.” Steve said.

“The Shadow Monster.” El said, looking up at her Dad. “It’s inside everything. The Demogorgons-”

“Demodogs!”

“-the Vines, Max... everything that’s a part of the army. If the Vines feel pain, so does Max-”

“And so does the Monster.” Lucas finished.

“It’s a Hive Mind.” El explained.

“A-a hive mind?” Joyce asked.

“A collective consciousness.” El shrugged.

“Yes, I know what it is.” Joyce said. “But you’re saying that... that the Shadow Monster controls the Hive Mind?”

“Like the Mind Flayer.” El nodded.

Everyone gave her a look. “Sorry, El, is that some Science Shit, or...” Nancy asked.

El sighed. “It’s a DnD thing, a monster from an unknown dimension. It’s so old-”

“It doesn’t know its true home. Thinks it’s superior to everything else and enslaves everybody.” Dustin finished. El gave him a look of surprise, and he said, “There was a manual someone left in the Library. Lucas and I liked it. A lot was confusing, but we got the gist of it.”

“Sorry, what does this have to do with anything?” Hopper asked.

“Uh, well...” El glanced back down at the sketch. “Since it views

other races as inferior, it tries to enslave them and their dimensions.”

“Like an apocalypse?” Lucas said, taking a while to pronounce the last word.

“Oh, that’s great.” Steve said. “That’s great. That’s really great.”

“Okay, so,” Nancy said. “If this thing is a brain that’s controlling everything, then if we kill it...”

“We kill everything it controls.” El finished.

“We win.” Lucas shrugged.

“Great, so how do we kill it?” Hopper asked.

El paused. “*That* is a great question, Dad. And I will tell you when the DnD manual updates with Shadow Monsters.”

“Well, then, what are we doing here?” Hopper groaned.

“We’re waiting for your Military Backup.” Nancy reminded him.

“How are *they* supposed to stop this thing? It’s not something you can just shoot!” El shouted.

“We don’t know that! We don’t know anything!” Hopper yelled.

“We know it killed everything in that Lab!” El shouted. “And that it’s only a matter of time before those Monsters, and those Tunnels, get to this town!”

“We have to kill this damn thing.” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, but there’s one problem,” Nancy said, “The Chief’s right. We don’t know anything about it, or how to kill it.”

“She does.” They turned to El, who was pointing straight at the other room; she was referring to Max.

El glanced around at everyone, until Joyce finally asked, “What?”

“If anyone knows how to destroy this thing,” El said, “It’s Max. She’s

connected to it. She'll know its weaknesses."

"Yeah, but we can't trust her anymore." Nancy reminded her.

"That thing is spying through her." Steve added.

El considered, staring down at the paper of the Mind Flayer, before crumpling it up in her hands. "She can't spy if she doesn't know where she is."

Joyce and Hopper threw open the Shed doors, and Hopper said, "Yeah, this'll work."

The two of them started throwing things out, tossing them into a pile in the yard. Steve and Nancy were put in charge of taping black sheets over the windows, and Dustin and Lucas dug through the trash for empty bottles.

That left El with Joyce and Jonathan, grabbing clothesline to use as a rope, and after a minute of silence, Jonathan said, "Do you think Will's okay?"

There was a pause, before Joyce responded, "I... I hope he is. He's a smart boy, he'll find his way home."

"He probably left when he saw the Lab People come." El said blankly. "So, he'll probably be back once he sees us."

"I hope so." Jonathan said, glancing towards the woods. "I just... I just feel so bad. For leaving him alone."

"The Lab showed up, and if you were there, there was nothing you could've done." El said, glancing between the other two as she reached up to cut the clothesline. "Best you could've done was distract them while he ran off."

She snipped the line, and Joyce asked, "Did... did Dustin and Lucas see the other one? Mike? Is he..."

El froze when she said his name, but quickly recovered, shaking her

head and taking a deep breath. "They didn't find him. They probably never will."

She snipped the clothesline, and let it drop to the ground.

The walls of the Shed were covered in paper and sheets and duct-tape, and a chair was taped to the floor. Hopper carried Max's body over, and they tied her to the chair, shining two flashlights from the ceiling towards her face.

Hopper pulled out a bottle of Ammonia, wetting a cotton ball with it. "This'll wake her up," he said. "You all should probably go."

"Like Hell I am." El shook her head, leaning against the wall.

"I'm staying, too." Nancy nodded. "I want to make sure she's alright."

Hopper glared at the crowd. "Sure, all forty-five of you can stay, why not?"

"We can go." Steve offered, grabbing Dustin and Lucas's shoulders. "Best if that Thing doesn't know that these kids are with her, especially if it knows what they can do."

"But-" Lucas paused, staring at Max, but he eventually shrugged and allowed Steve to lead them out.

"I'll go, too." Jonathan said, before turning to Nancy. "We'll be in the house if you need anything."

"We'll be fine." Nancy said, before turning back to Hopper as Steve opened the door, shepherding the boys out.

Jonathan reached the door, before pausing. "Mom? Are you coming?"

Joyce paused, looking between him and Max. "I... I'll stay," she said.

Jonathan nodded, and closed the door behind him.

"You don't have to-" Hopper began.

Joyce raised her hand, stopping him. “Just wake her up, Hop.”

Hopper moved forwards and placed the cotton ball under Max’s nose. After a second, her eyes shot open, and Max was awake.

## 37. She's Still There

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

#### *She's Still There*

Dustin stared out the window, before moving back to sit on the couch.

"Do you think she's awake yet?" Steve asked, standing in the middle of the room and swinging around his bat.

"I dunno." Dustin said. "I could look-"

"No." Lucas said, grabbing his hand. "You've done enough *looking* today."

"All we can do is wait." Jonathan said, sitting on the floor and staring at the ceiling.

After a second, Lucas asked, "How was Will?"

"What?"

"This year. Is he... is he good? Safe?"

Jonathan paused, then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, he's great. He loves books and art and music-"

"Did you show him real music, or just that heavy metal shit?" Steve asked jokingly.

Jonathan shot him a fake-glare, then said, "He missed you guys a lot. Always wanted to know if we'd found you yet."

Dustin and Lucas smiled a little, and Dustin asked, "When will he get back?"

Jonathan paused, before saying, "Soon. He'll be back soon. Don't



worry about it.”

Max looked around the Shed, trying to adjust her eyes to the odd lighting. El watched as she whipped her head around, eventually spotting the group. She made a move to get up, but the makeshift rope held her back. She glanced down at it, asking, “What is this?”

She kept trying to move, trying to push past the clothesline, but it held tight. “Why am I tied up? Why am I tied up?”

Hopper moved forwards first, kneeling down in front of her. “Max, hey. It’s me, it’s Hop. We just want to talk to you. We’re not gonna hurt you.”

“Where am I?” Max asked.

El moved next, pulling out a sheet of paper and holding it in front of her: the sketch of the Mind Flayer. “Recognize this?”

Max looked at it, shaking her head a bit too fast.

“Hey, we wanna help.” Hopper said. “Max, we want to help you, but you have to tell us how to kill it.”

“*Why* am I tied up?” Max suddenly sounded angry, and she started trying to move again. “Why am I tied up? *Why am I tied up?* Let me go!”

She started shaking wildly, trying to move fast, and Hopper had to reach up and try to hold her in one place. As she screamed, the two flashlights started to flicker on and off, causing Nancy and Joyce to jump. “*Let me go! Let me go! Let me GO!*”

She continued to scream, to screech and wail, until Joyce stepped forwards. “Okay! Okay, Max!”

Max stopped eventually, staring up at the woman in confusion. Joyce glanced around, before saying, “Max? Are you still there?”

Max stared at her blankly, an anger still behind her eyes, and Joyce

stepped back. Hopper moved next, releasing her and moving to sit in the chair they'd placed in front of her. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Hopper said, "Do you know what April 16 is?"

She stared at him, still blank, until he continued, "It's your birthday."

He waited another second, wondering if she was going to respond, before continuing. "When you turned Ten, you came to the Station with El to study, and then refused to leave. Wouldn't tell us why. So, I let you stay, and you wandered around the Lab and charmed everybody there. When you told them it was your birthday, they let you look over case files, even the gory ones. Everybody loved having you there, and then you slept over with El and I let you both stay up late to watch *Star Wars*, and we played old records. And the next day, you went shopping with us and we bought you a skateboard because yours got busted. And you asked if you could spend your birthday with us every year."

He stopped, still staring at her. She was staring back, and her expression was mostly confusion: however, he thought he saw a spark of sadness. That was *something*.

After they were silent for too long, Nancy stepped forwards, kneeling down in front of the girl, and saying, "Do you remember our first tutoring session?"

Max turned sharply to look at her, and Nancy continued. "I was, like, the fifth tutor your Dad tried to get. You two managed to piss off quite a few people. I walked into the room, and you immediately turned around and flipped me off. Instead of getting angry, I flipped you off right back. You immediately turned to El and said, 'She'll do.'"

She laughed to herself, looking up at Max to see if there was a reaction. When there was none, she said, "I figured out pretty quick that you guys were doing shitty in Math because you were bored, not because you were dumb. It was pretty easy to figure out how to get you guys to actually learn shit after that. I think... I think you guys liked me fine, I mean, you gave me a walkie-talkie that I'm not entirely sure you didn't steal from your Dad, and invited me to

Christmas and... I just want you to know, you two are like my little sisters. I can't imagine what I'd do without you."

Max stared at her, until she heard the third voice. "Do you remember the day we met?"

She turned, and El stepped forwards, looking at the ground, on the edge of tears. "When we first moved here, we had to be eight. I was on the playground, and I was new, and nobody wanted to play with me, because they thought since my Dad was a policeman I'd report them for saying mean things, and nobody cared about what games I liked, and I just wanted to cry. I just sat on the swings, and I tried to sing instead, and the only song I could think of was *Landslide*, because... because Sara used to like it. And I sung it, and I could hear you join in behind me, but I didn't want to stop in case you ran away, and when we finished the song, you walked up and asked if I wanted to play. It... it was the best thing that happened to me."

She finally looked up at Max, meeting her eyes, and her voice shook as she asked, "Do you remember the song?"

El took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and sung, "*Take this love, and take it down, if you climb a mountain and you turn around, And if you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills...*"

She looked back at Max, and jumped when she saw tears coming out of her eyes.

Hopper moved first, leaning forwards and saying, "Max. Max, if you're in there, just please... please talk to us. Please."

Max looked like she wanted to speak, opening and closing her mouth and continuing to cry. After several minutes, she stopped, freezing and staring at the air, and then she said, very calmly, "Let me go."

El felt her heart ripped out of her chest, and she stepped back, staring in horror at the girl in front of her.

However, she felt a tap on her shoulder, and she turned to see Joyce, who looked determined. "Follow me out." she whispered.

## 38. Close Gate

### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

#### *Close Gate*

Joyce burst into the house, grabbing a pad of paper from the counter and slamming it onto the table, reaching over to pick up a crayon from the floor as she did.

“Joyce, what’s this about?” Hopper asked, as the three others trailed in after her.

“What’s going on?” Lucas rushed in, followed by Dustin and the other teens, and soon they were all crowded around the table, as Joyce started to write on the paper.

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“What’s that?” Steve asked.

“Morse Code.” everybody else replied.

“She was tapping this.” Joyce explained, glancing up at Hopper as she did. “On the chair, while you were talking. She just tapped this on repeat. I think she’s talking, just not with words, like Will used to do.”

El reached over, taking the crayon from Joyce, and started translating.

*H E R E*

“Here.” she read, looking back at them. “She’s still in there.”

“She can still talk to us.” Hopper said. “We just have to keep pushing.”

El looked back up at her. “Do you have a record player?”

A record started to play in the Byers' shed. Max still had that confused look as El began to explain, "Remember this song? I got it for you for your birthday last year."

*"Sweet Dreams are Made of This, Who am I to disagree?"*

Max tapped on the side of the chair.

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*"I travel the world, and the seven seas. Everybody's looking for something."*

Joyce stood behind a post, tapping beeps into the walkie-talkie behind her back. Inside the Byers House, Dustin and Lucas were writing out the letters onto a paper.

C

*"Sweet Dreams are Made of This."*

"We went out for ice cream when you got your first A in Math." Nancy said, kneeling in front of Max. "And you punched some asshole kid in the face for picking on El. His parents were furious, but I high-fived you and got you an extra scoop."

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C L O

*"Who am I to disagree?"*

"That was the third time you broke into my police files." Hopper reminded her. "I think you thought it was a game, trying to find where I put them this time. After I made you put it back, you convinced me to give you coffee. Yeah, I'm not doing that again."

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C L O S E G

*“Travel the world and the seven seas...”*

“Your first night at our place, we stayed up all night.” El was sitting on the floor in front of Max, staring up at her. “You were still scared that you’d wake up in your Stepdad’s house, or in the... the other place, and I was scared that you’d disappear and I’d never find you. So, we snuck into the kitchen and had an impromptu dance party. And then the next day we went to the theater and watched *A Christmas Story* and spent all day in the arcade, and you scared the shit outta Keith and won at *Dig-Dug*, and we just... we just got to be Sisters for the day, Max.”

*“Everybody’s looking for something...”*

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“We’re sisters.”

*C L O S E G A T E*

“Close Gate.” Lucas read inside the house, looking over the paper.

At that moment, the phone rang.

It was loud- too loud. Lucas jumped to his feet, and darkness surrounded them. Within ten seconds, his shards had pierced the phone, setting it aflame. As Steve jumped up to put the fire out, Jonathan turned to the boys. “Do you think she heard that?”

Max heard the phone.

She sat up straight, whipping around to face the noise. She recognized the sound, remembered it from when she’d stayed in the Byers Living Room while Hopper picked up El. Suddenly, her eyes shut, as her location was relayed to the Others.

“Shit!” El yelled.

Joyce moved first, grabbing a syringe from the table and sticking it into her arm. "It knows," she said. "It knows where we are."

Nancy took a knife to the clothesline, ripping it up, and Hopper picked Max up, and they fled.

El and Hopper burst into the house, with Joyce following. Nancy had stayed behind to grab something, and Joyce was waiting by the door to lock it the second Nancy came in.

"She heard it?" Lucas asked, looking up from the table.

Before anyone could respond, they heard the very familiar screech.

"Shit." Dustin said, and suddenly Nancy burst into the house, a shotgun in her hands. Joyce locked the door behind them, and they rushed into the Living Room.

Dustin immediately moved to the window, and Steve pulled him away. "Nope! Nope, stay away from the windows."

"Those things'll jump through." Jonathan explained to him, as Nancy loaded the gun in her hands.

Steve grabbed his bat from the floor, while Hopper grabbed his own gun. El reached onto the table, grabbing the Guard's gun that she'd stolen from the Lab, and turned to see Dustin standing behind Lucas, who had his hands out, prepared. Jonathan and Joyce stood back, with the latter holding Max's body, waiting in a dark anticipation. The group all stared at the window, waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

They could hear the rumbles, and they kept their weapons following whatever noise they thought might come from one of the Monsters. The Demodogs seemed to be moving fast, but not towards the window- they were moving around, as if driven in a panic.

"What the hell's going on?" Jonathan asked.

They heard one of the Demodog noises, but it sounded- pained? And

one second after that, something catapulted through the window.

Everyone jumped back, pointing their weapons at the animal, but then suddenly froze.

A Demodog was on the floor, but it wasn't moving. It was flopped on its side, and it wasn't breathing. Hopper approached cautiously, and prodded it with his gun. It still didn't move.

"Gone?" Dustin asked.

Then they heard the door unlock.

They whipped around, staring, as the lock undid itself. They pointed their weapons again, once again waiting, once again prepared to fight whatever entered.

And then the door opened.

And Mike and Will walked in.

Everyone froze, all in different forms of shock. Joyce gasped and stepped back, and Steve let out a quiet curse. Dustin and Lucas gaped, with the latter dropping his hands. Nancy slowly lowered her gun, an unreadable expression on her face. Jonathan simply gawked, while Hopper didn't move, completely surprised. At first, Mike and Will didn't react; Mike held Will's hand as they entered, and they surveyed the group; after a second, Will looked relieved, while Mike simply looked determined.

And then he saw El.

El let her gun clatter to the ground, and she passed through the ground, stepping ahead. She stared at Mike, and Mike's expression dropped to match Will's- relief- and then he smiled, a smile of pure happiness.

El smiled back, joy completely overwhelming her.

He'd come back.

**Notes for the Chapter:**



I just realized we have less than a week until the end of the fic! I'm upset that it'll end until S3, but I am excited to see all your reactions to the ending!

Also, I got to work on the Vigilante AU which may-or-may-not involve superheroes. It's going pretty great, although it'll DEFINITELY be longer than Right-Side Up ended up being. However, I'm excited because I get to write Kali for more than six chapters, there's going to be so much Mileven fluff (and obvs angst) and I may-or-may-not be able to fit in a few "we get it, Finn Wolfhard has been in two 80's nostalgia trips" jokes (which will never get old, sorry). The working title for the fic(s) rn is "Shatter", after the Lindsey Stirling song "Shatter Me" (which is one of the best songs ever, hands down).

## 39. Protecting Him

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

#### *Protecting Him*

Her feet carried her over to him, and El threw her arms around Mike, clutching him to her, whispering, “Mike!”

“El.” he said back, and he gripped her to him, and she couldn’t let go.

He was *there*. He had come back, and he was there, he was with her, he’d come back to her, he was *okay*, he was *alive*. He had hair now, though it was slicked back against his head- why was he dressed like a punk?- and, oh Lord, he was a half foot taller than her now. How had he grown so fast? She’d have to look up to meet his eyes now. Why was he *tall*? He was bending over right now so as to hug her tighter. God, she hadn’t expected that.

She barely processed Will rush past them, barely heard Joyce pass Max to Hopper before enveloping her son in a tight hug, with Jonathan joining her in telling Will how worried they’d been and how much they’d missed him. Dustin and Lucas slowly started to approach, waiting and watching.

El finally pulled away, looking up at Mike, staring into his dark brown eyes, letting out a relieved laugh. “You’re here.” she said, breathlessly.

“You’re here.” he repeated, staring down at her, his face lighting up with joy.

“I never gave up on you.” she said quickly, wanting that to be the first thing he knew. “I called you every night. Every night for-”

“Three-hundred and fifty-three days.” Mike seemed to realize that completing her sentence was a mistake the second he stopped speaking. His smile dropped when she saw her confused, hurt look, and he quickly said, “I heard.”

El stared at him, still trying to figure out what that meant. He'd *heard* her? "Why... why didn't you say anything? Tell me you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let him."

El turned around, to see Nancy drop her shotgun. Nancy pushed past her, scanning Mike's outfit. "The hell is this? Where were you?"

"Where were *you*?" Mike asked, and Nancy pulled him into a hug.

The realization hit El like a bus. She could only stare for a second, before she yelled, "You've been hiding him. You've been hiding him this whole *time*!"

She jumped forwards, pushing Nancy in the back. Nancy jumped, before pulling away from Mike, who retreated a few steps, surprised. Nancy caught a quick look at the fury in El's eyes, before she said, "Hey! Hey, let's talk. Alone."

"Protecting him?" El repeated, as Nancy pushed her into an empty room- Will's bedroom. "*Protecting him?*"

"Listen," Nancy said, shutting the door to muffle the sound, "Listen, El. The more people who knew about him, the more danger he was in, and the more danger you were in-"

"Bullshit!" El shouted. "That's *bullshit*, Nance! We could've helped him, you could've told me he was *alive*!"

"El, the Lab has been watching us from Day One, waiting to see when we'll slip up!" Nancy retorted. "The fact I got away with hiding him away at all is a goddamn miracle!"

"So, what, I should thank you? For keeping him from me?"

"I'm not asking you to *thank me*, El! I want you to understand-"

"I don't! I *don't* understand! You're supposed to be my goddamn friend, and you go and keep him away from me a *freaking* year!" El said something a bit stronger than *freaking*.

"That's fine, okay? That's fine." Nancy said. "Blame me as much as you want, it was my decision, but don't you dare blame him, don't you dare, he had nothing to do with this-"

El looked shocked, as if the very thought offended her. "I don't blame him! I blame *you*! I blame *you*, this is *your fault*!"

She threw herself at Nancy, pounding on her chest and pushing her into the wall, screaming and sobbing. "You stupid, lying, disgusting piece of *shit*! You kept him from us! You're a *liar*! *You're a liar! Liar! Liar! Liar!*"

Nancy didn't fight back, she just hugged the girl, as all her emotions from the last year boiled over, and she sobbed in Nancy's arms. "It's okay, El. It's okay."

"Liar..." El choked, still trying to fight through her tears, but she finally gave in, sobbing and hugging onto Nancy and letting everything go.

"I'm sorry, El." Nancy said. "I'm so sorry."

The boys were all in a hug-pile on the floor.

After El had left, Mike had turned to Lucas and Dustin, relieved to see them, and thrown himself onto them, and Will had eventually rushed over to join them.

"I missed you so much." Mike finally said.

"We thought you were gone." Dustin told him, as they eventually sat up, all sitting together in a circle.

Will paused, then reached towards Dustin's mouth. "Teeth."

Dustin pulled away, laughing, and said, "Yeah! Yeah, these grew in!"

"Where were you?" Lucas asked, breathless and still holding onto Mike's hand.

“Nancy’s.” Mike responded. “And Will was here.”

“I was scared when we got here.” Will admitted. “Mike was following Nancy, but we saw the Monsters-”

“Demodogs.” Dustin interjected.

Will looked at him weird, then said, “They were outside my house, and I thought...”

He turned to look at Joyce and Jonathan, who were standing with the others, watching the boys hug it out. Jonathan spoke first, asking, “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Like what?” Mike asked, glancing between him and Will.

“Like you’re MTV punks.” Steve said. “You guys are dressed like somebody died.”

“Somebody almost died.” Will very helpfully said.

“But he *didn’t*.” Mike pointed out. He then looked up at Joyce, confused. “Who’s this?”

“This is Mom!” Will said, very proudly.

Mike nodded, before his gaze drifted to Hopper, who waved awkwardly at him. In his arms was an unconscious Max. He stared at her for a second, his gaze a mixture of fear, anger, regret and pity. He finally asked, “Max?”

Hopper nodded. “Yeah, kid. Yeah, this is her.”

The boys all stared at her, and then Will asked, “What’s wrong with her?”

“She, uh...” Hopper sighed, “The Shadow Monster, from the Upside-Down, it’s kinda possessed her.”

“Possessed?” Mike asked.

“Taken over.” Dustin explained, piping up.

“Controlling her mind.” Lucas added.

Mike looked to Will, and then he slowly nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s what I saw.”

“Saw?” Dustin asked, confused, as Jonathan left the room. That was *his* thing.

Mike nodded, still staring at Max, the guilt a lot more clear on his face. “When I looked for you.”

“What else did you see?” Hopper asked.

Mike glanced around at the kids, and suddenly Jonathan walked back into the room, handing him a pad of paper. Mike looked down at it, seeing a lot of Morse Code, with the translation at the bottom- *CLOSE GATE*.

“You opened this before, right?” Jonathan asked.

Mike bit his lip, before nodding.

“So, do you... do you know how to close it?”

Mike took a long look at his brothers, before nodding. “Yes.”

El walked out of the room, trying to steady her breathing so she didn’t cry again. Nancy walked in behind her, and the two girls surveyed the group in front of them; they were around a table, with papers laid out in front of them.

“Wh- what are you doing?” El asked, staring.

They all looked up, surprised to see her; Mike’s face lit up at the sight of her, though it fell again when he saw how obviously sad she was.

“Well...” Hopper said, glancing around to the others, “Mike’s going to the Lab to close the Gate.”

There was a long pause, until El said, “No, he’s not.”

“El...” Hopper began.

“No, no, that place is *swarming* with Demodogs.” El shook her head. “It’s a Death Trap, Dad, I’m not letting him-”

“El, I want to go.” Mike said. “I want to-”

“Mike, please...” El was crying again, everything suddenly hitting her.

Mike rushed forwards, pushing past everyone else, and grabbed her, hugging her again. “El, I’ll be safe.” he said. “I’ll be safe, El. But I have to close the gate.”

“I’m going with you...” El offered.

“No, you’re not!” said both Hopper and Nancy in unison.

“I want to help.” El said, pulling away from Mike and glaring at them. “I want to help him!”

“You can help him by staying here.” Hopper said. “If you get hurt, he’ll stop to help you and the Gate will stay open.”

“I won’t get hurt.” El said.

“You need to be here for Max.” Nancy said.

“Uh, about Max...” Steve said, and they all turned to him.

“What about Max?” El asked.

Steve paused, glancing between them all, before saying, “Well, if she’s part of the Mind Flayer’s army, and he controls all of it, and that thing dies-”

“Oh, shit.” El said, suddenly getting his point.

“So, we need to get that thing out of her first?” Joyce asked; El noticed that her arm was still around Will, who leaned into her.

“How the hell do we do that?” Nancy asked.

El paused, glancing towards the phone, realizing that it was burned. “Whoa! What the hell did you guys do to the phone?”

“Shards.” Lucas shrugged.

“Lucas set it on fire because it wouldn’t shut up.” Dustin elaborated.

“The fire was an accident.” Lucas retorted.

El stared at the phone, something clicking in her mind, but it took her a second to figure out what it was. She walked closer to the phone, reaching out to touch it, and said, “He likes it cold.”

“What?” she wasn’t sure who said that, but she turned around, a spark back in her eyes.

“He likes it *cold*.” she said. “That’s what Max said. The Mind Flayer, he didn’t like warm things. We need to *burn* it out of her. We need to get her too hot.”

“You think that’ll work?” Joyce asked.

“That’s the only plan we’ve got.” Hopper said. “We’ll have to take her somewhere safe, cover it up again.”

“We don’t have the time for *that*.” El sighed. “Let’s just take her to your shed, Dad. Even if she recognizes it, it won’t matter, we’ll just keep burning the shit outta whatever comes at us until that bastard finally leaves her alone.”

“Okay, so we’ll send Mike to the Gate, and take Max to the Shed.” Joyce said. “And once Max is safe, Mike will shut the Gate.”

“Who’s taking Mike to the Gate?” Steve asked, glancing around the group.

“I will.” Hopper volunteered.

“Like *hell* you are!” Nancy interrupted, walking up beside Mike. “I’m taking Mike, and you’re going with Max.”

“No way!” Jonathan jumped up.



“We’re not sending a teenager into that Lab.” Hopper said.

“Jesus.” Nancy sighed. “I can handle my own damn self, and Mike is my responsibility. Hop, you’ve got to be there for Max and for El, and Joyce has her boys. I can do this, I really can.”

“Nancy, you’re going to get yourself killed.” Jonathan said, trembling.

Nancy gave him a look. “Jonathan, I can handle it. I’m going to be fine.”

“I’ll protect her.” Mike added, nodding.

They looked at each other, and then Hopper said, “Well, then. Looks like we’ve got ourselves a plan.”

## 40. On the Way

### CHAPTER FORTY

#### *On the Way*

El and Mike stood together on the deck, staring at each other.

“Just... please stay safe.” El said, reaching over and grabbing Mike’s hand. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you again.”

“You won’t lose me.” Mike assured her, smiling.

“Just... there are a lot of Monsters in there. Don’t over-exert yourself.” El said. “And Nancy’s right there, and we’ll call you when Max is okay, and...”

Mike paused, then said, “El... Max is my fault.”

“What?”

He bit his lip, looking down to the ground so he didn’t have to see her face, his entire body tensed. “I saw you. I snuck into school, and you two were fighting and I knocked her down, and... and I’m *sorry*—”

It took El a second to process this, and then she gripped his hands harder. “Mike, it’s... it’s not your fault. She was getting Episodes *daily* and that Thing was going to get to her, it kept trying to get to her and it was going to do it eventually...”

Mike leaned over, giving her another hug. She hugged him back, and said, “It’s okay. We’re going to fix it, and then you can meet her. You’ll love her, Mike.”

They hugged for a little bit longer. When they finally pulled away, El said, “You’ll come back, though? Promise?”

Mike smiled, “Promise.”

He started to lean in a little bit, their faces a bit closer together, when they heard Nancy call out, “Mike! Come on!”

Mike glanced from Nancy to El, and they stared at each other, before he tore himself away, running off towards Joyce’s car, which she’d offered to let them borrow. El watched him go, feeling her heart sink in her chest. Finally, she turned around, going back into the house, where Hopper was picking up Max to take into his truck.

“Is it just us?” El asked blankly.

Hopper shook his head. “Joyce wants to come with. Make sure she’s okay. Steve and Jonathan are going to babysit the boys.”

“Alright.” she still felt numb, her mind still on Mike. However, she shook her head to clear it. She had to focus on Max now. “Alright, let’s burn that son of a bitch.”

Nancy drove the car in silence for a long while, before she said, “So, are we gonna talk about this?”

Mike was staring out the window. “About?”

“About... this.” Nancy gestured to all of him. “Why you look like you joined a gang.”

“I did.”

Nancy did a double-take. “You did *what*?”

Mike didn’t respond, and Nancy said, “Why’d you leave the treehouse?”

“To find Mother.”

“Oh.” she paused, before asking, “Did you find her?”

Mike sighed. “She has a new baby.”

“So, then what? She gave you and Will a punk makeover?”

“Well, then we went to Chicago.”

“*Chicago?*”

“Mm-hmm. That’s where the Gang was.”

“You went to *Chicago* and joined a *Gang*.” Nancy repeated.

Mike paused, before turning to look at her, and Nancy realized that his eyes were wet. “I shouldn’t have left.”

“No, no.” Nancy sighed, trying to both look at him and keep her eyes on the road, which was difficult to do. “No, this is my fault. I stopped coming to the treehouse, I wouldn’t let you even go outside, I... there’s a lot of things I should have done differently. It just... I feel like every time I care about someone, they get sucked into this... black hole.”

“Black hole?”

“Yeah, it was in one of your science books.” Nancy said. “You know, it sucks everything towards it and destroys it.”

“There’s no black hole near you.” Mike said.

“It’s a metaphor.” Nancy sighed. “I mean, my Dad couldn’t give a shit about anything that goes on, and my Mom ignored me for years and then threw herself onto my sister, and I broke Steve’s heart and *Barb*...” She shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “I just... I’ve just been scared that it would take you, too. And I’m sorry.”

Mike leaned over, placing his hand on her arm. “You don’t have a black hole. I’m going to be okay. And you’re going to be okay.”

Nancy smiled a little. “Did your gang teach you that?”

“More or less.”

She glanced over at him. “They didn’t do a bad job with your makeover, either. It’s kinda cool.”

“Bitchin’.” Mike said.

Nancy laughed. "Yeah. Bitchin'."

The boys all sat on the floor, whispering to themselves. Steve and Jonathan watched them from the corner of the kitchen.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Jonathan asked.

"Honest to God, they're planning something. I don't think they're very happy about being forced to wait here." Steve sighed.

"Well, would you? If one of your friends was going to a Death Lab and another one was about to burn the shit outta her sister?" Jonathan asked.

Steve paused. "Well, Nancy is going to the Lab..."

They were both in an uncomfortable silence for a bit, and then Steve said, "You know, you and Nancy... it's okay, I'm totally cool with it."

Jonathan blinked. "What?"

Steve gave him a look. "Don't give me that shit. I know she likes you and you like her back, and look, we broke up, and I told her it's okay, and you two are cool."

"What?" Jonathan said again.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Good God, man. Don't be an idiot."

Before Jonathan could respond, the boys ran in. Dustin spoke first, saying, "Listen, if that Gate is getting attacked, the Demodogs are going to go straight for Mike."

"But," Lucas picked up, "If we distract them, we can buy Mike enough time to shut the Gate."

"You're gonna use yourselves as *bait*?" Jonathan asked, horrified.

"And we know the perfect way to do it!" Dustin nodded. "The tunnels, they feel pain. We set them on fire-"

“Oh, yeah, that’s a no.” Steve shook his head.

“-and they’ll come running. We go in, light it up, get out, and Mike survives long enough to save the world.” Dustin finished.

Jonathan gave Will a look. “Are you in on this?”

Will nodded excitedly.

“Okay, so, first of all, *no*.” Steve said. “It’s our job to protect you little shits, and we’re not letting you get in trouble.”

“Steve, all we need to do is get their attention.” Lucas said.

“Yeah, and then we all die!” Steve said.

“That’s one point of view.” Dustin shrugged.

“No, that’s not a point of view, man, that’s a fact.” Steve sighed. “Look, we’re staying here, and you’re not going anywhere, okay?”

The boys glared at him, and then Dustin said, “Alright, time for Plan B, then.”

“Plan-” before Steve could finish, Lucas threw his hands in the air, and the room went completely black.

“Ah! Shit!” Steve yelled, jumping to his feet as he heard the boys run off. “Shit! Shit!”

“What the hell?” Jonathan asked, and Steve heard him get to his feet.

“Lucas just blinded us, we need to get into another room.” Steve said. He started to move, promptly tripped over a chair, and yelled, “Damn it!”

After a second, Jonathan said, “The boys are running away, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and we’re going after them.” Steve sighed. “Those little shits are getting grounded, I swear to God.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

We've got four more chapters left, folks: one for the tunnels, one for the exorcism, one for the Gate, and then the epilogue.

## 41. The Tunnels

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

#### *The Tunnels*

The boys ran.

Will started to falter a little once they reached the woods, but Dustin was able to drag him along. They ran for as long as they could, until they reached the open field, the one that Lucas remembered from the Map in El's house.

They stopped to breathe before even looking at the Pit; Will sat down, trying to steady himself, as Dustin and Lucas turned to each other.

"Are we really going in?" Dustin asked.

Lucas nodded. "We have to help Mike."

They turned to Will. "Are you going to be alright?" Dustin asked.

Will nodded. "Just... tired."

"We've got a lot of matches." Dustin said, pulling a box from his pocket. "We can light a bunch and throw them and then run. Lucas can shield us if things get too bad, but that tires him a lot so we can't count on that."

"It looks like the Bad Men left a rope hanging from the hole." Lucas said, peering into the pit and holding out his hand, conjuring some light in his palm. "We can get up and down from there."

Before they could add anything else, they heard the sound of some sort of vehicle driving up. They all froze, staring ahead, as Steve's car pulled into the field, parking right next to them. "Shit." Dustin said, as Jonathan jumped out of the passenger side.



“What the *hell* were you thinking?” Jonathan asked.

Will looked sheepishly at the ground while the other two boys simply death-glared him. “We’re helping.” Lucas shrugged.

“No,” Steve said, coming out from his side of the car and walking over, “You’re killing yourselves.”

“Technically, there’s a chance we’ll make it out.” Dustin said.

“Oh, a *chance*, I’m sorry, how high is that?” Steve rolled his eyes.

Dustin paused. Lucas answered with, “Uh... I’d say, one-in-nine?”

“Listen,” Will said, looking up at the teens, “Mike needs help. We’re his brothers. We have to help our brother.”

Dustin added, “I know you want to keep us safe. So, come with us, and keep us safe.”

Jonathan and Steve looked at each other for a long while, and the boys were considering just making a run for it, but then Steve sighed. “There’s extra gas in the car. We can use that to blow up the tunnels. There’s also an extra jacket, rip it up and stick it over your face, Nancy said that shit sprays chemicals at you. Hurry it up.”

“Thank you!” Lucas said, rushing to Steve’s trunk to open it up.

Steve sighed. “Nancy’s going to skin me alive.”

Jonathan dropped into the tunnels last; they’d decided to have one teen on either end of the group, to watch out for stray Demodogs. He glanced over at the others; Steve was standing in the front, reaching into his bag to get a hold on the nail-bat, while Dustin pulled a paper out of his pocket; a map of the tunnel drawings. He pointed at a red X, saying, “I think it’s this way.”

“What’s that way?” Steve asked.

“The center.” he shrugged, and he started to walk.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Steve moved to block his path. “I’m going ahead. Any of you little shits die down here, it’s my fault. Let’s go.”

Will held back to walk beside Jonathan, looking up at him with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Hey, if we can help Mike and Nancy, we should.” Jonathan shrugged. “But you stay with me, alright? I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I won’t.” Will shook his head.

Jonathan waited before asking, “Where did you go?”

“Chicago.”

Yikes. “How did you get there?”

“A nice man drove us.”

“What?”

“Hey!” Steve called from the front, and Jonathan and Will looked up to see that the others were several feet ahead. “Keep up the pace, dipshits, we don’t have that much time!”

Jonathan and Will gave each other a quick look before they continued.

They continued down the tunnels with little interruption- however, once they reached one large fork, it took them several feet to realize that Dustin and Lucas had disappeared. Of course, the boys had yelled- apparently one of them got something sprayed in their face- but once the others arrived, they’d calmed down and the group continued.

Finally, they exited into a large, dark room, with multiple tunnels shooting off into different places. “Alright, boys,” Steve said, shining his flashlight ahead, “I think we found your hub.”

They stared for only a few seconds, before Lucas said, "Let's drench it."

They were each given a canister of gasoline, and they rushed as fast as they could, pouring gas onto every piece of the floor and wall that they could. Will kept mostly to the corners and crevices, while Jonathan was tall enough to reach parts of the wall. Steve even managed to spray some onto the ceiling, before they finally decided they were done, and they threw their canisters into a corner- the environment be damned- and rushed into the tunnel back.

Steve stood in the front, a match held in his hands. "Alright, you guys ready?"

They all nodded. "Light her up." Jonathan said.

Steve sighed. "We're in such deep shit."

And then he threw the match, and they ran as fast as they could.

They could hear the tendrils screech behind them, could feel the heat of the flames on their back, as they fled as fast as they dared, jumping over roots and trying to follow Jonathan, who was now in the front of the group.

They could hear Demodogs roar around them, running to stop whatever problem threatened them. They almost made it through a large tunnel, when Will tripped and fell to the ground, a tendril wrapping around his leg.

"Shit!" Jonathan yelled, rushing forwards to grab his brother, pulling him by the arm and trying to rip him from the grip of the tunnel.

"Will!" Dustin and Lucas both yelled, running forwards to help, but Steve got there first, whipping out his bat and hitting it to the root until it squealed and released the kid.

"Keep going!" Steve yelled, as Jonathan lifted a shaking Will to his feet. "We've gotta-"

A much louder screech sounded behind them, and they whipped around to see a Demodog blocking their path. They stared in horror

for a second, with Steve still weighing the bat in his hands.

Then Will pushed past them, getting to the front of the group. "Will!" Jonathan yelled, but Will shot him a look and stepped forwards again.

"Gray?" Will called, and the Demodog stared at him, studying the boy ahead.

After a second, Will started walking again, and they all screamed at him to stay back, but he held up his hand and kept going. He kneeled over, removing a strip of fabric from his face. "Hello." he said, staring at the Demodog.

The Demodog stared back, and Jonathan was shocked that it hadn't even tried to attack him yet. It approached slowly, but showed no signs of violence.

"Can we go?" Will asked.

In response, the Demodog opened its face, screeching.

Will held up his hands until he stopped, then said, "Okay. Okay. Sorry I dropped you. Do you want food?"

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a broken bar of chocolate. "I got this in Chicago. Do you like it?"

The Demodog backed up a little, and Will opened the bar, reaching down and dropping it onto the ground. The Monster approached, apparently sniffing, and then it started to eat the chocolate. Will gestured, and Dustin and Lucas understood first; Dustin rushed past the animal's side, Lucas quickly following. Steve moved next, spying the monster out of the corner of his eye. Jonathan finally approached, slowly, standing behind Will and waiting.

"Go." Will whispered. "I'll be right there."

Jonathan paused, then passed by. He waited in the back of the group, staring at Will. Slowly, the boy got up, moving the fabric back over his face, and moved after them. He paused, staring at the animal, which briefly looked up at him, then returned to the food.

“Goodbye.” Will said, and then the group ran again.

They kept running, hearing Demodogs approaching fast. They finally reached the exit tunnel, the rope still dangling towards the ground. Steve and Jonathan stopped at the bottom, pushing the boys up; Jonathan helped Will up first, while Steve lifted Dustin behind him. Lucas stepped back as they reached for him, saying, “Let me go last. I have a Shield.”

Steve paused, then said, “We don’t have time for this. Jonathan, you go up, then Lucas.”

Jonathan nodded, grabbing the rope and pulling himself up.

As he reached the ground, turning and holding out his hands for the boy, they heard the Demodogs screech again.

They apparently saw something, because Steve pushed himself in front of Lucas, pulling out his bat as the boy behind him held out his hands.

“Lucas!” Dustin yelled, holding out his hands. “Lucas, come on!”

Will and Jonathan joined in, shouting for the boys left in the tunnel, and then the Demodogs came.

There had to be a hundred of them, and as they rushed into their field of vision, Jonathan instinctively grabbed Will and turned him away from the view; however, to their shock, the Demodogs rushed away from them, leaving Steve and Lucas in the dust.

They stared for a long while, and then Lucas looked up, horror in his eyes, and said, “Mike.”

Steve shoved the bat back into his bag, lifting Lucas up the rope before climbing up himself. They scrambled to their feet, turning towards the car; what were they going to do? Drive down to the Lab?

Before they could, however, the headlights of the car lit up on their own, and they all shielded their eyes from the sudden brightness. It

lasted for a good ten seconds, and then faded.

They stared, and then Will looked down at the hole they'd just left; it was closing up, covering itself with dirt.

"Did we do it?" he asked.

Nobody knew how to answer.

## 42. Exorcism

### CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

#### *Exorcism*

They drove Max to the Shed, and Hopper once again threw all the boxes out into the field. There was a bed in one room- apparently the Shed used to be his Grandfather's Cabin or something- and they stuck Max to the bed, using rope to bind her hands and feet to the edges. That was when they began filling the cabin with as much heat as they could.

The bed was dragged to the room with a fireplace, which was filled with as much kindling as possible and lit with a match. Every heater that they'd found in either the Cabin or the Byers House was plugged in and turned a high degree, all the lamps were turned on, and the windows were shut and locked.

"Are you sure this'll work?" Joyce asked, turning up the heat on one of the fans.

Hopper and El glanced at each other; this was their best shot.

"Let's kill this son of a bitch." Hopper said.

There was several minutes of silence while Max laid on the bed, starting to sweat as the room heated up. El was starting to feel hot, too, not that she would say it: then Dad would make her leave, and she had to be there for Max. To save Max.

Max flickered her eyes open, confusion spread across her face, and she tried to sit up, looking around. Her wrist-ropes prevented her from even getting into a sitting position, and she turned, terrified, towards the group. Joyce stepped back a little, pity spreading across her face, and Hopper and El's forced neutral expressions dropped.

"What's happening?" Max asked, still looking around wildly, her hair flying against her face. "It's too hot! *It's too hot! It's too hot! It hurts!*"

She started moving, flopping against the bed, straining against the binding, screaming and flying and making any attempt to free herself. They stared in growing horror; Joyce leaned over to grab El's hand, as the girl had started to shake. "It's okay, El." she whispered, though she couldn't hide the trembling in her own voice.

*"It hurts! It hurts!"*

Hopper stared at the creature, then instantly moved over to the heater, turning it up even higher. Max screeched, still screaming, as Hopper kept moving, kept turning things higher and hotter.

*"It hurts! Stop it! Stop it!"*

"Dad, stop!" El yelled, as her head tried desperately to try and compute how much heat Max would be able to withstand, but Hopper didn't listen. He kept turning up the heat, and Max kept screaming.

*"Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!"*

She continued to scream, screaming as much as she could, as loud as possible. Hopper stepped back, and Joyce said, "Hop, it's not working!"

El let go of the woman's hand, as Hopper yelled back, "It's got to work!"

"Hop, look at her! It's killing her!"

*"Let me go! Let me go!"*

El reached onto the floor, where her Dad's lighter sat. While Joyce and Hopper argued, she picked it up and twisted it, and watched the fire flicker to life in front of her eyes. Slowly, she approached Max, the flame held in front of her.

*"Let me GO!"*

"El!" Hopper finally noticed her moving, and El forced the flame in front of her, holding it straight at Max. Max screamed, sitting up, and suddenly they all got a good look at her neck.



Black stands had appeared, like veins, stretching towards her face. They kept moving, finally reaching her mouth, and her screams turned... her screams turned *demonic*. Her voice was lower, louder, more unnatural. El shut the lighter, dropping it to the ground in shock, and then Max ripped through the rope on her right hand, reaching over and grabbing El by the shirt, pulling her over.

With one hand, Max held the other girl in the air, moving her hand to her neck, clutching at it with an abnormal strength, holding her high as Hopper yelled. He ran forwards, trying to release her hold, but Max didn't seem to react at all.

El couldn't breathe, could barely think. She could feel the sweaty hand around her neck, and could feel the pressure forced on her, and her Dad trying to pull her away. She wasn't sure what she was doing, what she should be doing. She stared down at the dark, murderous look in Max's eyes. A horrible, awful look that she didn't think she'd ever see. Those eyes were one step away from being completely engulfed in black.

Joyce, who had been standing back in horror, suddenly broke into a run, reaching and grabbing the poker from the fire place. She rushed ahead, shoving it into Max's side. Max let out another unnatural scream, but she released El, who collapsed onto the floor, gasping for air. Hopper ran over, sitting her up, and asking, "Are you alright?" El kept breathing, staring up at Max, who was still struggling to get free, to get out.

The lights were flickering now, wildly blinking off and on. Hopper reached over to lift El to her feet, and the girl immediately turned back to the girl on the bed, jumping onto the edge of the mattress and leaning over her, pounding on her chest, as Hopper grabbed Max's hand, holding it back.

"Get the *hell* out of my sister!" she screamed, using all of her remaining breath to yell as loud as she could.

Suddenly, Max's head shot back, her mouth opened, and some kind of black smoke flew out of it, a cloud of darkness erupting from her. It held in the air for a second, as everyone stared at it in horror, and then it burst away, flying out the open door.

The lights dimmed, and Joyce worked instantly, moving to turn the heat off, before rushing out the door to see if the cloud of darkness had vanished. Hopper and El, however, immediately turned to Max, who had fallen against the sheets, her eyes shut tight.

“Max? Max?” Hopper said, reaching over to check for a pulse, as El grabbed her shoulders, trying to shake her away. “Max! Max, wake up, Max!”

“Max, please, wake up!” El shouted, her throat sore and her words shaky, and she started to cry. “Max, please, Max!”

“Come on, Max.” Hopper pleaded, reaching forwards and brushing her hair out of her face.

Max laid still for too long, and El started to sob, and then she opened her eyes.

“Oh, God!” Hopper sighed with relief, and El managed a smile through her tears, a sudden joy rushing to her.

“El? Hop?” Max managed to say, in a quiet, exhausted voice.

El reached forwards first, hugging Max to her and sobbing. Max started to cry, too, and Hopper wrapped his arms around the two of them, and all three of them were hugging and crying for what felt like forever. They wouldn’t have cared if it was. They could hear Joyce talk to someone over the walkie-talkie, but none of them cared. They just grabbed onto each other and cried.

It was several minutes before they finally let go, after Joyce called, “Hop?”

They looked up, and saw that the lights were flickering again, and then suddenly they all lit up, nearly blinding them; El only barely managed to shut her eyes before it got too bright. Then the light died again, disappearing.

“What happened?” Max asked, still barely able to speak.

El stared at the lights, then turned back to Max. “I think that was Mike.”

## 43. The Gate

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this is late. I was kinda busy yesterday, and like, I don't know if you guys liked the last chapter or not? Nobody really said anything so if I did something could y'all tell me? Anyway I have this thing if you guys still want it

### CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

#### *The Gate*

The Lab was right in front of them.

Mike got out of the car, staring up at the building. He could still remember everything that had happened to him there; the screaming, the sobbing, the poking and prodding and days of torment and the experiments and tests and the *Gate*.

Nancy touched his shoulder, and he realized that he'd been shaking.

"If you're not ready..." Nancy trailed off. They both knew that wasn't an option.

Mike paused, staring up at her, then smiled. "I'll be safe."

Nancy sighed, then grabbed his hand, her other hand gripping a shotgun, and they walked inside the open gate, and then into the Lab.

It was a lot like he remembered it. True, he remembered the lights working, and there being less blood and Demogorgon-Slime on the floor, but the walls were the same, and the cold, still atmosphere was the same, and the feeling of dread in his chest that he'd had ever since he first walked into that place... it was almost as if this place was the opposite of Home. The one place he would never feel safe, the one place that made him break into a cold sweat and tremble and shake and want to cry.

But he didn't cry. He had a job to do. So, after freezing in terror for a few seconds, he squeezed Nancy's hand, took a deep breath, and pressed on.

The halls eventually got dark, so Nancy fished a flashlight out of her bag and handed it to Mike. "Until we get there." she muttered, and Mike nodded, turning the light on and shining it in front of them.

Eventually, Nancy even released Mike's hand, using both hands to hold the gun up and point it forwards. Just in case. Mike felt a quick burst of terror the second she let go, but he steadied himself. She was right there. She wasn't leaving him. She was going to protect him. She wasn't going to leave.

Nancy kicked a door open, and Mike shone a light onto a staircase. Nancy gestured, and the two of them continued down. Nancy knew where she was going- she mentioned something about having been shown the Gate earlier, while he was gone- but she probably didn't know that Mike knew, too. He remembered, even though it was a year ago. That day replayed over and over in his head at night, tormenting him in his nightmares. It was the worst mistake he'd ever made, and he couldn't forget it. Not yet. Not until he fixed it.

They turned a corner, about to move onto the next flight of stairs, and then they saw blood, scattered across the railing and floor.

Nancy stepped in front of Mike, and said, "Stay here."

Mike nodded mutely, still staring at the red. Nancy walked forwards, gun pointed and body tensed. She turned a corner, and caught sight of what was there. "Shit." she said, and she tossed the gun to the floor, running up. Mike slowly descended, until he caught sight of who was in the corner: an old man, dressed like one of the Doctors. Nancy seemed to know him, rushing forwards and staring at the gaping wound on his leg.

"They got you?" she asked, looking back up at him, and Mike shone the light towards them.

The Doctor didn't seem to notice him at first, instead staring at Nancy. He opened his mouth to say something, but Nancy jumped

forwards, putting a hand on his shoulder. “No, no, don’t talk. You lost a lot of blood, but you should be okay.”

She grabbed the edge of his coat, ripping off a stretch of fabric from the bottom, and started to tie it around the wound. Mike slowly kept coming closer, shining the light so she could see better. The Doctor finally spotted him, staring in confusion. Mike didn’t recognize him, he must have arrived at the Lab after he’d left.

Nancy glanced behind her, also seeing Mike, and then turned back to the man. “Oh, yeah. Probably should have mentioned that. Dr. Owens, this is Mike. He used to go by Eleven. He’s been staying with me for about a year, and he’s about to save all our asses.”

Owens stared at him, and Mike simply stared back. He wasn’t sure what to say, if he could even say anything.

“When this is all over,” Nancy said, “I don’t think it would be very hard for you to pull some strings, and help him out a bit, too. He’d like to go outside, I think. He might have mentioned that once or twice. It’d be nice if he could lead a normal life, one where he’s a little kid and not a Lab Rat. You know? Just a thought.”

She tied the fabric, maybe a little too tight. Owens let out a quick gasp, and then Nancy said, “But think about it.”

She stood up, and turned to Mike. “Come on, kid. Let’s go.”

The lights in the hallway continued to flicker, as did Mike’s flashlight. Nancy didn’t think it was the battery; the Monsters never liked light, and they were getting close.

Nancy stayed ahead of the boy, her gun at the ready. Finally, they turned a corner, spotting two wide open doors. The doors that led to the viewing room, where the broken window led straight to the tunnels. “Stay here.” she said again, and she walked forwards.

She passed through the doors, and turned a corner, to see another room up ahead, with a Demodog gurgle sounding out of it. She stepped forwards slowly, trying to quiet her own breathing. She

didn't know if bullets could stop it, but maybe she could stun it enough to beat the shit out of it with the gun handle. She stopped right outside the door, waiting and trying to figure out what to do. She didn't have a reflective surface to see inside, so she would just have to go for it.

She heard the Demogorgon screech, and she took her chance, leaping in, shotgun at the ready. Behind the shattered window, two Demodogs turned to stare at her, about to approach. Nancy pointed the gun, ready to fight.

Suddenly, the Demodogs stopped. There was a tense silence, and then they turned and jumped into the hole, leaping into the tunnels. Nancy froze, staring in confusion. Were they scared of her? That was pretty out of character for them.

She saw Mike approach out of the corner of her eye, and they stood together, staring through the broken window.

After a minute, Nancy heard a buzz from her bag. "Nancy, are you there?"

It was Joyce's voice. She reached in, and answered, "Yes, yes, I'm here."

There was a pause, before Joyce said, "Close it."

Nancy managed to get the elevator to lower the two in front of the Gate, red light shining on their faces. It was even bigger than Mike remembered, and he gripped the railing with one hand, grabbing Nancy's arm with the other.

It was red, and throbbing, and generally off-putting. It filled Mike with dread and disgust and hate, and he turned to look at Nancy. She looked down at him, a trusting look in her eyes, and she nodded.

Mike released her hand, stared ahead at the Gate, and held out his hand. It shook as he thought, just focusing his push towards the gate, thinking *Close. Close. Close.*

It was only a few seconds before they saw a Shadow rise behind the Gate; it was some sort of head, but not a human one. Nancy grabbed the gun beside Mike and he just tried to keep focus. *Close. Close. Close.*

The red started to get replaced by black, closing up over the Gate. The face was turning towards them, and debris was starting to fly around the air. Mike wasn't pushing fast enough.

*"I want you to find something from your life. Something that angers you. Now channel it."*

Mike shut his eyes, letting the negativity of the Lab surround him. He remembered being grabbed, and pushed, and thrown to the ground. He remembered being shoved into Solitary, being experimented on until he cried, he remembered killing the men and the look Will gave him when he saw what he'd done.

The black started to move faster.

He was bleeding out of both nostrils, and he was starting to feel tired. But no, he couldn't stop. Not now.

A screech sounded beside him, and Nancy whipped out her gun, shooting towards the wall. She started moving around, shooting at moving things, swearing whenever she saw something. The Demodogs must have arrived. It didn't matter. Mike had a job to do.

*"You have wounds, children."*

His Family didn't need him.

*"Horrible wounds."*

He opened the Gate. He opened it and let the Monster out, and it kidnapped Max and killed Barb and was trying to rip the world apart.

*"And they're festering. And they will grow."*

A black cloud of *something* emerged from the Gate, a different black than the wall that was closing in around the red. The cloud was moving closer, closer to them. Nancy didn't see; she was facing the

wall, shooting at Monsters.

*“Spread.”*

Dustin was screaming. Lucas was screaming. Will was screaming. He would hear them, sometimes, outside his door, and he could do nothing. He could do *nothing* .

The black cloud had almost hit them, reaching forwards, towards his face.

*“And eventually, they will kill you.”*

He couldn't go outside. He couldn't find his brothers, or see El.

El.

His brothers.

El.

If this Gate didn't close, they would die. El, and his Brothers, and Nancy, and Max, and the Byers, and Steve, Kali, Wilder, Mick, Funshine, Dottie, Axel, and even his Mother. And his Sister. He had to protect them. That was what he had to do.

He let out a scream, and he felt his feet lift off the ground. Both his hands were out now, and blood was streaming from his face. He wasn't even thinking anymore, wasn't sure what he was going. He didn't see Nancy whirl to watch him. He just saw the Gate, and knew it had to shut.

*No more.*

Both his hands extended, a wall of fire blocked them from the black cloud, which retreated, a loud screech hitting his ears. He wasn't sure if the screech was from him or the Cloud, and he didn't care.

He faced the Gate, and he screamed, and the Wall closed up, and suddenly it was black. It was black, and not Red.

And then it was white; light shone from above, and any Demodogs



left fell from the wall, collapsing to the floor, their life force gone.

Mike collapsed, too, to the floor of the elevator. Nancy dropped her gun, not caring where it dropped, and grabbed him, clutching him to her chest as the elevator shook. She held him, and he could barely move, but he managed to wrap his arms around her, too. He didn't have the energy to cry, but he was *exhausted* , and he wasn't sure what had just happened.

"You did so good, Mike. You did so good." Nancy comforted, clutching him, and he realized that she was crying. "You did so good. You did it."

He shut his eyes, resting against her, knowing that she would protect him.

And he fell asleep.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Tomorrow's the last chapter, I guess. Then I'll probably take a break before posting the Superhero Vigilante AU fic(s). I have to do a lot of research for that.

## 44. Every Breath You Take

### Notes for the Chapter:

I just wanted to say that I love you guys so much

### CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

#### *Every Breath You Take*

#### *One Month Later*

The Lab was gone.

Murray's tapes had done the work they needed, and within a month, the Lab was locked up and everyone evacuated. The town was in shock from the fact that the Department of Energy had been doing lethal experiments in their own backyard. They were also a little shocked about a week later, when they saw the High Schooler, Steve Harrington, walking down the street with two boys, introducing them as his cousins and buying them new clothes as if he was their parent. Sometimes, El Hopper and Max Mayfield would join them, and the four children could be seen in the Arcade, with the girls teaching the boys how to successfully beat *Dragon's Lair*- a lesson that lasted about two weeks.

Nancy could hear two adults whispering about it as she walked into the Bar, passing by and hoping that she looked old enough to be in there. She didn't make eye contact with any of the workers, instead sitting down in a booth and staring the man in front of her.

"You need a drink?" Owens asked.

Nancy shook her head. "I got a kid to raise, apparently that involves a lot less alcohol than I would like. How's your leg?"

"Been better." Owens shrugged. "Pretty sure my football career's

over.”

It took Nancy a second to realize that was a joke, and Owens passed her a plate of food. “I’m not gonna finish this, you go ahead.”

“I ate before I left.” Nancy shrugged. “A child almost crammed waffles down my throat.” She started to wonder if he was stalling. “Do you have it?”

“Well, sort of.” Owens reached into his bag. “You know Harrington got his Temporary Custody Papers three weeks ago; he’ll have those two boys until we can track down any relatives they may have, but that might be harder than it sounds, especially with Ten.”

“Dustin.” Nancy corrected.

Owens sighed. “Dustin, sorry. And Joyce Byers got her son’s birth certificate this morning, but we’re waiting a few months to let him run around town. We don’t want to overload these people with new kids; her story’s that he was abducted from the Hospital and the Police finally found him wandering the streets. Hopefully the people here will be too tactful to ask the kid directly where he was.”

“And Mike?” Nancy asked.

“Well, I can’t get you Custody, even temporarily, until you’re eighteen.” Owens said. “In about a year, and then we can probably let him out into public. But I can get you something else.”

Nancy was a little disappointed: she had hoped to officially be in charge of Mike before tonight. But at least Owens had *something*. Mike was, right now, at the Byers House, hiding in Will’s room with him and sleeping on a cot. It was better than the treehouse, but he told her that he missed her a lot. She missed him, too, though she still saw him every day, and now he also had the Byers to help raise him. But she couldn’t expect Joyce to raise three kids forever with what little pay she actually got.

He passed her an envelope, and she slid it open, seeing a birth certificate, with MICHAEL THEODORE WHEELER written on the name line.

"*Wheeler*." she read, then looked up with an incredulous smirk. "I think I'm a little young to have a thirteen-year-old."

"Keep reading." he prompted, and she pulled out more of the paper.

Her eyes widened in shock, once she saw the lines for the Mother and Father. "Why are my parents on here?" she asked, looking back up at him.

"Well, funny story." Owens said. "When the Department of Energy first started our... immoral experiments, we reached out to those living in town."

Nancy stared at him. "Are... are you saying that... that my Mom was in there?" He continued watching her, as the pieces fell together. "And... Oh, oh, God. Are you... are you saying that Mike is *my brother*?"

Owens nodded, laughing a little at her shock. "Yes, unfortunately." his face fell again, and he said, "Officially, he was a stillbirth. Do you... do you remember that?"

Nancy reached through her memory. In the back of her head, she *thought* she remembered a room being set up with boys' decorations, and remembered her Mom coming home and crying for weeks, but... she'd been *four*. She barely even remembered having a brother, had probably chalked it up to a weird dream. She supposed her parents should have mentioned it, but, well, the Wheeler Way of Dealing with Trauma was to never mention your grief and move on with your life, so that was probably explanation enough.

And, oh, *God*, that was why her Mom was the way she was. Even without the additional child death, she imagined all the experiments would have made her Mom that paranoid and given her enough nightmares for a lifetime. But the "death" of Mike... God, she must have felt too scared to pay much attention to Nancy, scared that something would happen to her, too, and she must have seen Holly as her second chance...

"It all coming together?" Owens asked.

Nancy stared at him. "Jesus."

He sighed. "If you want to just give that to your parents and let them raise their son, we can probably give them the same excuse we gave Joyce Byers. It would definitely take a lot of responsibility off of you."

Nancy's first instinct was to say *yes*, to let her parents raise the kid, to go about being a teen and going to College and making her own life... but at the same time, they would have no idea what to do with him. If they even accepted him back, her Dad probably wouldn't give a shit about raising him or listening to him, and her Mom would either over-smother him or try and avoid him. And they would have *no clue* how to react to his trauma. He'd still wake up screaming from nightmares sometimes, or curl in the corner and cry because he heard the wrong noise, or go nonverbal for a day. She could see her Mom freaking out, or her Dad telling him to toughen up, and that would just make it worse.

But still, she was *seventeen*. How was she supposed to raise him? And if she didn't tell her parents that she found their long-lost son- which seemed like a shitty thing to do, but if she wanted to hide him from any of the abusive assholes left, she could probably live with it- what was she supposed to say when she brought home a kid to raise? Even her parents would notice her doing *that*.

"You don't have to decide now." Owens said. "Just keep the certificate, and I'll keep going for Custody unless you tell me otherwise."

Nancy nodded.

"Still, until you get that, best to keep him hidden wherever he is."

Nancy paused, then said, "What about one night out?"

"One night?"

"Yeah. How unsafe would that be?"

Owens blinked at her. "What's so important about one night?"

“Hurry it up, dipshit!”

El laughed as Max raced ahead, grabbing her hand and dragging her inside. The school gym had been completely re-decorated for the Snow Ball, with blue-and-white streamers hanging from the ceiling and a banner decorating the wall. Kids were running around in miniature tuxedos and fluffy dresses, with whatever music was popular at the time blaring from the speakers. El glanced over at the Photo Booth, where Jonathan was standing; he'd volunteered to take the pictures of everybody. She glanced around, looking for somebody else, only for someone to grab onto her from behind.

She jumped and looked around, to see Will hugging her tightly. “El!” he yelled, and she laughed and hugged him back.

“Hey, buddy, you look cool!” El said, glancing at him.

Will giggled. “You’re in a dress, and your hair is different!”

El laughed and nodded, looking down at her light blue dress. Her curls had indeed been tamed that morning, which required a lot of hairspray and patience on the part of Max. Max herself had refused to even consider wearing a dress, instead opting for a black sweater and red dress pants. She also was back to refusing to let anyone touch her hair, letting it fall over her shoulders.

“Did Jonathan drive you?” El asked, and Will nodded. “I didn’t realize you could come.”

“Nancy said that *I’d* be okay for one night.” Will shrugged, and El almost deflated at the emphasis. “So long as I don’t draw too much attention. It’s kinda loud, but I think I’ll be okay. I wanted to see what dances look like.”

“Where’s-” El began, when suddenly Max let out a laugh.

“Dude, what’s up with your hair?”

El turned, to see Lucas and Dustin rush in the doors. Dustin’s curls were sprayed into some wild style, and he gave Max a look. “Steve

helped!" he said. "It looks *cool!*"

"Keep telling yourself that." Max nodded at him; it was nice to see her sarcastic side peek out again. The closure of the Gate really did wonders for all of their nerves. "And did Steve also get you guys those mini tuxes, or-?"

"Yeah." Lucas nodded, before shyly asking, "Do you... do you like it?"

"Bitchin'." Max said, which sent Will into a burst of giggles.

"Is Steve here?" El asked, not spotting the teenager among the crowd.

Dustin shook his head. "Said he had homework."

El wondered if he was scared of seeing Nancy- they'd gotten along perfectly fine since their breakup, but she imagined it still wasn't easy to see her all the time.

The song changed- from *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* to *Almost Paradise*- and Max sighed. "Shit, I think I wanna dance. Is that weird?"

"Max, you were possessed by a Demon last month." El gave her a look. "You're allowed to dance if you want."

"We almost didn't get here." Lucas was saying to Will, and El turned to listen. "We got lost on the way in."

"Lost?" Max asked. "Didn't you two stalk us all of last year? You think you'd know your way around the school."

"Well, we didn't really *stalk...*" Dustin said awkwardly, glancing away.

Max sighed, then grabbed a surprised Lucas's hand. "Come on, kid, let's figure out how to dance."

She dragged him off onto the dance floor, and El let out a laugh, before turning to the boys. "So, how's life with Steve?"

"I think his parents finally noticed that we exist." Dustin shrugged. "Steve just said we were some orphaned cousins. They thought it was weird for Lucas to be, for some reason, but they let us stay so long as we don't bother them, which won't be a problem. I don't like them."

"Hmm, good judgement." El hadn't met Steve's parents, but they were apparently dicks. "You two know how to dance?"

"Mom taught me." Will said, as Dustin shook his head. Will paused, then told Dustin, "I can show you."

"You sure about that?" El asked, glancing around at the other students. She would wouldn't care, obviously, but the other kids were huge assholes.

"Of course. He's my friend." Will said. "Come on, Dustin!"

And they ran off, and El stood alone under an arch.

Great.

Joyce ran into Hopper outside the building.

"You here for Max?" she asked, leaning against his car beside him.

"Well, she and El wanted some space." Hopper shrugged. "I'm giving them a few feet."

"Same with Will. Not letting him out of my sight for a while." Joyce laughed a little, as Hopper pulled out a cigarette. "You heard from her parents?" He shook his head, and she added, "Think they'll ever make it back?"

"We'll have to see." he said.

"You find out what's taking them so long?"

Hopper paused. "Well, we don't *know* that something- or someone- is keeping them out of town. They might still come back for her."



"If they do," she asked, "I'm guessing you won't let her go quietly."

"Not back to her asshole of a Stepdad." he said. "She's been through enough shit already."

"Well, we always know Nancy's got a treehouse if we need to hide her somewhere." Joyce joked, as Hopper passed her the cigarette.

"And my treehouse is open to whatever kids need it." they jumped, turning to see Nancy approach- her hair was pinned up, and she had a plaid dress on. "You two spying on your children?"

"What are you doing?" Hopper asked.

"Well, I'm about to go in and take over a shift at the punch bowl." Nancy shrugged, "And then I'm probably going to make out with Joyce's son."

Joyce gave her a look, and Nancy laughed. "I'm joking. Jonathan and I will be working." She paused, then said, "Can I ask something?"

They nodded, and she asked, "This whole... this whole parenting thing, it doesn't get easier, does it?"

"Well, I can't imagine a lot of things that are harder than burning the shit outta one possessed kid while trying to keep them from choking the other." Hopper quipped. "But, yeah, it's a pretty difficult job."

"It's not easy, no." Joyce answered. "But... it may be cliché to say, but it's worth it."

"It is." Hopper nodded.

Nancy smiled. "That's good to know."

El sat down in a chair, staring blankly at the wall and wondering if she could go home early. She didn't have a ride, but maybe she could hitchhike with one of the other bored kids. If she could find one, that was. Everyone else seemed to be having fun. But she'd really only come for Max, and because she hoped that he would actually show

up, but she knew that'd be stupid, that he should be hiding, that it wouldn't be safe, that...

She looked up, and she completely froze over.

Mike had just walked in.

He looked confused, and a little lost, as he entered. He was wearing a simple brown jacket over a tan sweater, with a loose, red tie. His hair wasn't slicked back anymore, and it was a lot, well, fluffier than she thought it would be. She was on her feet before she could think, staring at him through the crowd. He finally spotted her, his bewilderment dropping to a joyous smile.

Nancy walked in behind him, giving El a smile and pushing Mike forwards a little, before going straight to the punch bowl. El slowly pushed through the crowd of dancing students, passing by Max and Lucas, who looked like they were having quite a lot of fun. She stopped in front of Mike, still trying to get used to having to look up at him now.

"El." he said breathlessly, completely captivated by her.

"Mike." she responded, staring up into his eyes. "You look... you look amazing!"

He blushed bright red, and said, "You... you look beautiful."

She giggled, pushing a curl behind her ear, before asking, "Do you... do you wanna dance?"

He paled, glancing at Nancy- who was looking across the room at Jonathan- and muttering, "I... I don't..."

"That's okay, I don't either." El laughed, grabbing his hand. "Let's figure it out together."

Mike blinked, still staring at her in awe, and then he said, "Together."

"So, Michael Wheeler," El smiled up at him, "May I have this dance?"

Mike smiled back. "As you wish."

She dragged him onto the dance floor, grabbing his hands and putting them on her waist, imitating the people next to them. He blushed harder as she moved her hands to his shoulders. As they started to sway to the beat of the song, she wrapped her arms around his neck instead, and pulled in closer.

*Every move you make...*

The song played over the speakers, and El saw Dustin and Will dancing in the crowd, laughing about something, without a care in the world.

*Every vow you break...*

Nancy moved away from the punch bowl for a bit, going over to Jonathan and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

*Every smile you fake, every claim you stake...*

Max was still dancing with Lucas, trying to help him keep his step in time. She laughed a little, asking, "You got a tux and everything, but you didn't have Steve teach you how to dance?"

*I'll be watching you...*

"I didn't think..." Lucas admitted, glancing away, "You know, that I'd dance at all."

"Hey. It's fine. Dancing's weird." Max smirked. "Especially for someone who's only been in the world for a year, and spent most of that stalking his friend."

"Not most of it." Lucas said.

"Shut up, Stalker, and follow the music." Max laughed, smiling up at him. "We'll figure this out yet."

*Since you've gone, I've been lost without a trace. I dream at night, I can only see your face...*

El stood on her tiptoes a little as they turned in a circle, staring up at Mike's eyes. He watched her, smiling, looking at her like he still couldn't believe she was there. She was feeling the same about him.

*I look around, but it's you I can't replace, I feel so cold and I long for your embrace...*

She didn't know how long it would be before she saw him again, how long it would be before he could be in the World, whether or not they were actually safe anymore.

But, God, she didn't care. She loved him.

*I keep crying, "Baby, baby, please..."*

They both leaned in at the same time, and they kissed. It was quick, but it was definitely better than their first kiss the year before. El pulled away and smiled up at him, and he smiled back. El leaned in again, resting her head against his chin, and they danced together until the music was long gone.

*Oh, can't you see?*

They didn't know that there was still a school on the Other Side.

*You belong to me?*

They didn't know that someone was watching the school on the Other Side, the faint echoes of the song trailing along the wind.

*How my poor heart aches...*

The Shadow still watched. The Shadow still waited.

*With every step you take...*

And the Shadow had a plan.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

And here we are at the end (for now)!

As planned, I will do random one-shots for this AU on this fic: (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/13144869/chapters/30065700>) However, it will be nowhere near as scheduled, I'll pretty much update it randomly. I'll let you know after S3 is released when to expect the Rightside-Up 3.

Another reason the one-shots will be more random is I'm spending a lot of time on my Superhero AU- it will be titled "Shatter" and split into 3-4 fics (leaning more towards three but who knows what could happen?). I won't be posting that immediately after this, though; I've been doing extra research for this, including looking up other Stranger Things Superpowers AUs to make sure that mine isn't too similar to theirs- don't want to accidentally plagiarize someone! I've also been Googling a lot to find out how their powers would affect their daily lives, as well as looking up a lot of writing tips for other things that will be included, like panic attacks and PTSD. (If anyone has tips on that, btw, I'm all ears, I want to do it right.) Hey, I never said this was going to be a fluffy fic. I mean, the first one will be more fluff than the other two, and it's not going to be non-stop angst, but my username is "midas touch of angst" for a reason. And in case you're wondering, the boys' powers will be different in "Shatter." Also, Part III is probably going to be a crossover with the 2017 version of "It". Just letting you know ahead of time.

EDIT: Here's a link to Part One of "Shatter" if y'all want it! (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/13575153/chapters/31157043>)

Thank you so much for reading this fic all the way through, and I hope to write more of it soon! Love you all! :D